

The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939

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CONTENTS

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| Abstract | | i |
| Acknowledgements | | ii |
| Abbreviations | | iii |
| INTRODUCTION | | 1 |
| CHAPTER ONE | ‘Smash the Means Test! Save Spain!’; United and Popular Front Activity on the Home and Foreign Fronts, 1936 – January, 1937 | 22 |
| CHAPTER TWO | Disunity in the Official Labour Movement | 65 |
| CHAPTER THREE | Dissension Over Spain: Catholics and Communism | 79 |
| CHAPTER FOUR | The Unity Campaign and the United Front, 1937-1939 | 109 |
| CHAPTER FIVE | The United Peace Alliance Campaign and the Munich Crisis, 1938 | 160 |
| CHAPTER SIX | The Cripps Petition Campaign, 1939 | 192 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN | The ‘Capitalists’: Liberals, Conservatives and the Popular Front | 222 |
| CHAPTER EIGHT | The Tyneside Foodship Campaign, 1938-1939: A De Facto Popular Front? | 241 |
| CONCLUSION | | 277 |
| Bibliography | | 291 |

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the united and popular front campaigns in the north east of England. The region was important for the national success of both projects since it was dominated by a moderate and loyal labour movement. Chapter one examines united and popular front activity in the region in 1936 and provides an explanation of why there was so little of it. The second chapter focuses on divisions within the labour movement which provided significant barriers to united and popular front supporters. Chapter three examines the divisions related to the significant number of Catholics within the labour movement. It argues that Catholic disquiet over the labour movement's attitude to the Spanish civil war did not provoke serious internal divisions, though Catholics remained opposed to Communism and therefore to the united and popular fronts. The Unity Campaign of 1937 and its effect is discussed in chapter four. This campaign drew very little support from within the labour movement and failed to improve relations between the left parties. Its effect, however, was not as damaging as some have claimed.

The following four chapters deal solely with aspects of the popular front. Chapter five discusses the 1938 United Peace Alliance campaign and examines the fresh potential that the aftermath of the Munich settlement offered. The 1939 Cripps Petition campaign is examined in chapter six. Both campaigns failed to mobilise significant labour movement support in the region. Chapter seven considers the attitudes of Conservatives and Liberals to the popular front. Liberal support was almost non-existent. Liberal attitudes were generally characterised by opposition to both socialism and communism, therefore their natural allies were the Conservatives, who largely supported Chamberlain and thus opposed the popular front. Chapter eight, on the Tyneside foodship, assesses the argument that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns constituted the closest thing to a popular front in Britain. Generally speaking, these campaigns cannot be seen as de facto popular fronts as they were humanitarian and not political. The thesis concludes that the united front was not very united, nor was the popular front very popular in the region, reflecting their failures at national level.

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It seems conceited to dedicate a thesis that will not do the topic it deals with justice but, nevertheless, I will. So I dedicate this thesis to those who struggled against fascism in the past and those who struggle against fascism now but, more importantly, to those who struggle for a better world, a world based, not on private profit, greed and exploitation, but on equality, freedom and the maxim 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their need'. History is, for me, about being inspired by those who struggled in the past and learning the lessons of their struggles. I hope that this thesis may contribute to this, albeit it in a tiny way, and that the lessons from this tumultuous period of history can be learned and applied now and in the future.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACTU- Association of Catholic Trades Unionists
 AEU- Amalgamated Engineering Union
 AGM- Annual General Meeting
 AR- Annual Report
 ARP- Air Raid Precautions
 ASLEF- Amalgamated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen
 ASW- Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers
 AUBTW- Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers
 BCC- Basque Childrens' Committee
 BCPL- Birmingham Council for Peace and Liberty
 BLPES- British Library of Political and Economic Science
 BUF- British Union of Fascists
 CAPR- Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction
 CCC- Churchill College, Cambridge
 CNT- Confederación Nacional de Trabajo (Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union)
 CO- Conscientious Objector
 CP(GB)- Communist Party (of Great Britain)
 DCFLP- Durham County Federation of Labour Parties
 DLP- Divisional Labour Party
 DMA- Durham Miners' Association
 DMOR- Durham Miners Offices, Redhill
 DRO- Durham Record Office
 DUL - Durham University Library (Palace Green)
 EC- Executive Committee
 FAI- Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)
 GPL- Gateshead Public Library
 GSS- Gateshead Socialist Society
 IB- International Brigade
 IBDAC- International Brigade Dependants' Aid Committee
 IFTU- International Federation of Trades Unions
 ILP- Independent Labour Party
 IWM- Imperial War Museum
 JPLP- Jarrow Progressive Labour Party
 LBC- Left Book Club
 LLP- Local Labour Party
 LLY- Labour League of Youth
 LNU- League of Nations Union
 LP&TC- Labour Party and Trades Council
 LRC- Labour Representation Committee
 LSC- Labour Spain Committee
 LSI- Labour and Socialist International
 MFGB- Miners' Federation of Great Britain
 MLHA- Manchester Labour History Archive
 MML - Marx Memorial Library
 NAC- National Administrative Council (of the ILP)

NCL- National Council of Labour
 NCMA- Northumberland Colliery Mechanics' Association
 NCO - Nuffield College, Oxford
 NCSS- National Council for Social Service
 NEC- National Executive Committee (of the Labour Party)
 NEFTC- North East Federation of Trades Councils
 NJC- National Joint Council (of the labour movement)
 NJCSR- National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief
 NMA- Northumberland Miners' Association
 NMM- National Minority Movement
 NPL- Newcastle Public Library
 NRL- Newcastle Robinson Library
 NROM- Northumberland Record Office at Morpeth
 NRON- Northumberland Record Office at Newcastle
 NTFLP- Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties
 NUDAW- National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers
 NUGMW- National Union of General and Municipal Workers
 NUR- National Union of Railwaymen
 NUT- National Union of Teachers
 NUWM- National Unemployed Workers' Movement
 PAC- Public Assistance Committee
 PLP- Parliamentary Labour Party
 POUM- Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista: Worker's Party of Marxist Unification (an anti-Stalinist communist party)
 PPC- Prospective Parliamentary Candidate
 PPU- Peace Pledge Union
 RBL- Royal British Legion
 RDC- Rural District Council
 RPC- Revolutionary Policy Committee (a Communist inspired faction within the ILP)
 SDPC- Sunderland and District Peace Council
 SMAC- Spanish Medical Aid Committee
 SSPL- South Shields Public Library
 SCRO - Surrey County Record Office
 SWCSA- South Wales Council for Spanish Aid
 SWMF- South Wales Miners' Federation
 TC- Trades Council
 TGWU- Transport & General Workers Union
 TJPC- Tyneside Joint Peace Council
 TUC- Trades Union Congress
 TWAS- Tyne and Wear Archives Service
 UAB- Unemployment Assistance Board
 UDC- Urban District Council
 WEA- Workers' Educational Association
 WI- Womens' Institute
 WMRC- Warwick Modern Records Centre
 YCL- Young Communist League

INTRODUCTION

The Labour Party was a relatively young organisation in the nineteen thirties. Established in 1900, the Labour Representation Committee (renamed the Labour Party in 1906), only became a serious national political force when it adopted a new constitution and structure in 1918. The first Labour government of 1924 was dependent on Liberal support for its survival and foundered in its first year. The party formed a second administration in 1929, but was again reliant on the Liberals. The timing of this second administration was also unfortunate as the party proved itself incapable of dealing with the effects of the international economic depression following the Wall Street Crash in 1929.

Labour was decisively beaten by a coalition of Conservatives, Liberals and ex-Labour Party members standing on a 'National' ticket in the 1931 general election. This National Government subsequently dominated British politics for the entire decade, easily winning a second term in 1935. By 1935 the administration was really little more than a Conservative one, as the Samuelite Liberals had joined Labour on the opposition benches and the National Labour Party had been wiped out at the election. The united and popular fronts emerged as strategies for attacking the National Government and its disastrous domestic and foreign policies. The express purpose of the popular front was to remove the National Government from office before a deteriorating international situation became irreversible.

For several reasons, the circumstances surrounding the fall of the second Labour government in 1931 were to have significant and lasting repercussions for the labour movement and its attitude to the united and popular fronts. Firstly, after Ramsay Macdonald declared his decision to head a National Government on 23 August 1931 (taking Philip Snowden, J.H. Thomas and a handful of others with him), the labour movement became even more suspicious of co-operation with other political parties to the right and of demagogic leaders. Macdonald, a once trusted and revered leader, had left many in the labour movement feeling bitterly betrayed. Distrust of Communists was more long-standing, stretching back to the time of the creation of the Communist Party in 1920. General hostility to the Communists' ostensible creed, Marxism, was in evidence before the Great War.

The behaviour of Oswald Mosley instilled a further lesson in the minds of many in the labour movement. He cemented his reputation as darling of the left at the 1930 Labour Party conference when he attacked the leadership for its paucity of ideas and proposed a resolution supporting his own Memorandum. This document, which advocated the expansion of purchasing power in the domestic market and the state control of foreign trade, was only

narrowly defeated. Mosley then left the Labour Party and established the New Party taking four Labour MPs with him. He went on to found the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and developed a reputation as a political adventurer with no loyalties to any movement or cause that he did not control. There was intense suspicion within the labour movement of left wingers such as Stafford Cripps, who appeared to behave like Mosley. Cripps, who only joined the Labour Party in 1930, was an ex-public schoolboy and a wealthy barrister. The detractors of Cripps' campaigns in the late thirties would make much of his wealth, claiming the Socialist League was a 'rich man's toy' and pointing out that only someone of considerable means could have funded his Petition Campaign of 1939.¹ To be compared to Mosley was potentially highly damaging. The right wing of the labour movement used the comparison to good effect even in the later thirties. This undoubtedly damaged the campaigns Cripps was involved in, namely the Unity Campaign and later his Petition Campaign to persuade the Labour Party to accept a popular front policy in 1939.

Secondly, the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), in total disarray after the events of the summer and virtually leaderless, was decimated at the October 1931 general election. After an acrimonious campaign the Labour vote dropped from eight to six million, with only 51 MPs elected. George Lansbury was the only cabinet minister to survive the cull, along with two junior ministers, Clement Attlee and Stafford Cripps. The PLP consequently lost a great deal of its prestige. With the main leaders gone or defeated, the unions, in the shape of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) General Council, and especially Ernest Bevin of the Transport and General Worker's Union (TGWU), began to take effective control of the Labour Party. The TUC General Council, on Bevin's initiative, re-vamped the old National Joint Council (NJC) in 1931 on the basis of trade union domination. The NJC, which became the National Council of Labour (NCL) in 1934, began to meet more frequently and issue policy statements, despite the fact that it was, theoretically, merely an advisory body. With Dalton elected chair of the NEC 1936-7 (and the Labour Party's 'effective' leader) and Bevin as chairperson of the TUC General Council, the right wing's control over the labour movement was further enhanced. The NCL was used by Bevin and Dalton to steer Labour policy wherever they wanted it to go. It eventually determined the key Labour policies of the period: collective security, the acceptance of rearmament, opposition to fascism, and opposition to the united and popular fronts.² The

¹ B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) p241

² The NCL met before Labour's annual conference and its decisions greatly influenced conference. The left eventually won a concession on this, ensuring that the 1939 Labour conference was held at Whitsun. The price for this victory was no annual conference in the crucial year of 1938, despite the demands from many DLPs and other labour movement organisations for a special conference on the international situation (see chapter five).

rank-and-file tendency to distrust both the concentration of power in the hands of a few and demagogic figures such as Cripps did not, curiously, adversely affect Bevin and Citrine's positions of dominance after 1931.

The Labour rout of 1931 was only partially reversed in the 1935 general election. The election was fought on foreign policy with Baldwin convincing the electorate that his government was the true guardian of collective security and the League of Nations. The Labour Party, though polling over 8 million votes (almost as many as in 1929), only won 154 seats. One of the key debates surrounding the utility of the popular front in Britain in this period was the extent to which Labour could improve their position sufficient to take a majority of seats in a general election.³ (A Gallup poll revealed that Chamberlain would receive 54% of the vote in a general election in January 1939.)⁴ Though it has been generally accepted that Labour would not have won a general election in 1939 or 1940, Laybourn, for one, refused to rule out a surprise victory.⁵

The third major effect of 1931 was that Labour lost a significant section of its most left wing members as the lurch to the left of some Labour leaders (most notably Attlee, briefly, and Cripps) was reflected in the reaction of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) to the 1931 debacle.⁶ Disillusioned with Macdonald's cautious policies, the ILP had already come into conflict with the Labour Party over the issue of control of its members during the term of the Labour government. The ILP fought the 1931 election as an independent group in protest at being denied the right to determine the voting behaviour of its members and in 1932 the party voted to disaffiliate from Labour.⁷ Although the disaffiliation damaged the Labour Party, the effect on the ILP itself was catastrophic. Its membership declined dramatically from 1932.⁸ By

³ See G.D.H. Cole, 'The British People's Front: Why, and How?'; H. Dalton, 'The Popular Front' and 'A Socialist', 'Working class Unity and a Popular Front', *Political Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.4 (October-December 1936) pp481-489, 490-498 and 499-508

Cole argued that the popular front was far more than an electoral pact: it was a crusade that aimed to break up the solidarity of the government and drive it from office.

G.D.H. Cole, *The People's Front* (Left Book Club, Gollancz, 1937) pp13-34

⁴ J. Cronin, *Labour and Society in Britain, 1918-1979* (Batsford, 1984)

⁵ K. Laybourn, *The Rise of Labour. The British Labour Party, 1890-1979* (Edward Arnold, 1988) p95

Eric Estorick and Roger Eatwell agreed that Labour alone would not win an election in 1940. Swift thought that the possibility of a Labour victory was only 'extremely remote' and Thorpe concurred.

R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975) pp308-316; E. Estorick, *Stafford Cripps. A Biography* (Heinemann, 1949) p162; J. Swift, 'Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40', Ph.D. Thesis, Lancaster University (1997) p6 and A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p273

⁶ For a recent study of Attlee's career in the thirties which depicts him as a far more able and effective Labour leader in the period than has been generally accepted, see J. Swift, op cit., passim

⁷ For a recent discussion of this see G. Cohen, 'The Independent Labour Party, Disaffiliation, Revolution and Standing Orders', *History*, Vol.86, No.282 (2001) pp200-221

⁸ Dowse put the decline at 60% whilst Pimlott put it at 75%.

July 1936 the party only had 3,751 members.⁹ The ILP, believing that the final crisis of capitalism had come, also swung to the left, embracing neo-Marxist doctrines. The schism with the Labour Party created a void for a left wing faction within the party. The Socialist League was formed from ex-ILP members who wished to stay in the Labour Party and members of the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda. Cripps took over in 1933 after the first Socialist League leader, E.F. Wise, died suddenly.

*

It is in the aftermath of 1931 that the subsequent campaigns for united and popular fronts should be viewed. The united front was a plan to bring together the ILP, the Communist Party and the Labour Party under the banner of a common programme to fight the Conservative-dominated National Government. The key feature of the united front was that it was to be exclusively 'working class'. There was to be no co-operation with the Liberal Party, which was regarded as middle class and capitalist. As well as providing a response to National Government attacks on the British working class (such as the iniquitous family Means Test and failure to do anything for the distressed or euphemistically named 'special areas') the united front was also anti-fascist. Advocates of the united front thought that Britain could easily become fascist and, as evidence of this, pointed to the support that some members of the British ruling class already expressed for fascist states and their leaders.¹⁰

The united front policy had existed in Britain as long as the Communist Party (CP) itself. From the time of its formation in 1920 the CP had made several attempts to affiliate to Labour. These efforts were consistently rebuffed by Labour, who argued that the CP was externally controlled (by the Soviet regime) and, as an avowedly revolutionary party, was not committed to democratic methods or the British constitution. The Campbell case and Zinoviev letter, which together provided a 'red scare' at the 1924 general election and contributed to Labour's defeat, suggested that association with Communism was electorally disastrous for Labour. In 1928 the Communist International (Comintern) imposed the 'new line' of 'class against class' which involved a complete change of tactics (and became known as the 'third

R.E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre. The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1940* (Longmans, 1966) p193 and B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977) p58

In 1938 Fenner Brockway argued that disaffiliation had been positive for the ILP as it had forced the party to develop its policy and led to an improvement in personnel. There were no longer careerists using the party as a stepping stone to office and there were less middle class or so-called intellectual members. In 1977, however, he thought disaffiliation had been 'stupid and disastrous' and blamed himself for it.

F. Brockway, *The Workers' Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) pp215-6 and F. Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow* (Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, St.Albans, 1977) p107

⁹ ILP NAC Minutes, 4 & 5/7/36 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/12)

¹⁰ See R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933-39* (Constable, 1980)

period'). Now Labour leaders were depicted as the greatest enemy of the working class and denounced by Communists as 'social fascists'.¹¹ However, the rise of fascism in Germany forced a reversal. Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933 was ascribed by many on the left to the fatal split in the German working class between the Communists and Socialists. The internecine fighting, it was claimed, had debilitated the left and allowed the extreme right the opportunity to take over. The 'class against class' policy was gradually discarded and replaced by a renewed effort to create a united front.

The British CP, on instructions from the Comintern, proposed the formation of a united front with the Labour Party, the TUC, the Co-operative Party and the ILP in early March 1933. The newly disaffiliated ILP, despite having been subjected to constant Communist attack in the 'third period', responded favourably and began discussions within the month. A joint anti-fascist demonstration of 40,000 in Hyde Park soon followed and anti-fascism became one of the main arenas for united front activity before 1936. United front anti-fascist activities centred around the Relief Committee for the Victims of German Fascism which held its first conference in May 1933 with Labour activist Ellen Wilkinson speaking. This organisation subsequently held several large joint meetings. British fascism was also vigorously opposed by united front activity, for example by organised disruption of the BUF Olympia Rally in June 1934.¹² Wilkinson became involved in a Co-ordinating Committee for Anti-Fascist Activity in July 1934, along with Communist fellow traveller, John Strachey. That September, there was a large united front counter demonstration to a BUF rally in Hyde Park.

However, there were problems within the united front from the outset. The CP claimed that the ILP leadership was forced into co-operation by pressure from its membership. Robert Dowse asserted, however, that the opposite was more accurate as there was strong opposition to co-operation with the CP in many ILP regional divisions.¹³ This opposition was particularly strong in Lancashire where, in May 1934, most ILP members left the party to establish the Independent Socialist Party. The majority on the ILP's governing body, the National Administrative Council (NAC), wanted to continue co-operation with the CP, as disaffiliation from Labour had cost them most of their influential trade union members. The CP, despite the

¹¹ For a recent re-examination of the effects of the 'class against class' or 'third period', see M. Worley, 'Left Turn: A Reassessment of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period, 1929-1933', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol.11, No.4 (2000) pp353-378

¹² Branson claimed that the beatings hecklers received at the hands of BUF stewards turned many against the BUF. This view has been questioned recently by Martin Pugh.

N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p121 and M. Pugh, 'The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate', *Historical Journal*, Vol.41, No.2 (1998) pp529-542

¹³ R.E. Dowse, *op cit.*, p187

efforts of Labour leaders, retained some influence in the unions. Those supporting united front activity in the ILP thought that their party's lack of dogmatism would eventually win over rank-and-file Communists. Conversely, the CP followed a united front policy partly because it hoped to win over ILP members, and this is what occurred. Communist proposals for a united party were consistently opposed by the ILP, however, and provoked feuding between the parties. Some in the ILP, including Fenner Brockway, criticised the entry of Russia into the League of Nations in 1934. There were also wide differences in attitude to Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia in October 1935. The Socialist League saw the conflict as that of different imperialisms and the ILP largely agreed, criticising League of Nations sanctions against Italy and calling on workers to enact their own.¹⁴ The CP disagreed: arguing that the war was 'colonial', it supported Abyssinia as Italy was both fascist and imperialist and an Italian victory would encourage Hitler. A Communist inspired faction within the ILP, the Revolutionary Policy Committee (RPC), argued that the ILP should offer co-operation with the Comintern. The ILP leadership refused and differences between the parties over Abyssinia led to the departure of the RPC in late 1935. It claimed that the ILP was not revolutionary and was on a path to reaction. After this separation, the ILP came increasingly under the influence of Trotskyists who were highly critical of Stalin's Russia. Communist disruption of the ILP Guild of Youth also caused problems. Before 1936, the Socialist League was reluctant to involve itself in united front activity but in 1936 it accepted the need for Communist affiliation to Labour.

In addition, all Communist and ILP overtures to Labour were rebuffed. In a statement entitled 'Democracy and Dictatorship' issued on 24 March 1933 the Labour Party and TUC rejected the approach. They claimed that the fear of Communist dictatorship had led to fascism and called upon the public to join the party that acted as a bulwark against dictatorship of the fascist or Communist variety.¹⁵ Perturbed at the growth and popularity of united front anti-fascist organisations, Labour moved against Communist ancillary organisations in September 1933, listing eleven which it proscribed.¹⁶ The 1933 Labour conference rejected a call for a united front and endorsed the NEC's attitude. Another joint ILP/CP letter to Labour in February 1934 outlining the fascist danger and calling for united front activity predictably

¹⁴ For a recent study of this see P. Corthorn, 'The Labour Party and the League of Nations: The Socialist League's Role in the Sanctions Crisis of 1935', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol.13, No.1 (2002) pp62-85

¹⁵ See M. Newman, 'Democracy versus Dictatorship: Labour's Role in the Struggle Against British Fascism, 1933-1936', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.5 (1978) pp67-88

¹⁶ *The Communist Solar System* (Labour Party Publication, 1933)

failed.¹⁷ Labour condemned Communist misrepresentation in attacks on them and again stated that they would not make common cause with a party that accepted dictatorship.¹⁸ Later that year the TUC made its move against Communists. In June 1934 it circularised trades councils urging them to exclude all who were associated with the Communist front organisation, the Minority Movement. Then, on 26 October, came circulars sixteen and seventeen, the notorious 'Black Circulars'. Circular sixteen informed trades councils that if they had Communist or fascist delegates sitting on them they would no longer be recognised as 'official', whilst circular seventeen requested unions to ensure that Communists did not hold official positions within their structures. As Clinton pointed out, the political views of individual delegates were now subject to the approval of the trade union movement's central body.¹⁹ Communist attempts to discuss with Labour how to avoid splitting the working class vote in the general election of 1935 were ignored.

Undeterred, the left continued agitating for a united front. From late 1935 the CP launched a campaign to affiliate to Labour. A third of votes at Labour conference supported the plan. This was the largest vote the CP had received in a Labour conference but was insufficient to secure victory. In 1937 the united front took the form of the Unity Campaign, which was a campaign of meetings and agitation jointly undertaken by the ILP, CP and Socialist League. A manifesto was issued with a list of joint demands covering both domestic and foreign issues including an alliance with Russia and the abolition of the Means Test. The Unity Campaign faltered when the Labour leadership disciplined the Socialist League because its association with the CP meant it had contravened the Labour constitution. Under the threat of the forcible expulsion of all those who were Socialist League members, the organisation dissolved in May 1937. The 'Maydays' events in Barcelona brought the Unity Campaign more trouble. In an attempt to assert Communist dominance within the Republican zone, the Communist-controlled Catalan police attempted to seize the CNT-controlled Barcelona telephone exchange. This provoked street fighting between Communists and the anarcho-syndicalist Confederación Nacional de Trabajo (CNT). The Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM), an anti-Stalinist Marxist party, supported the CNT militants and was

¹⁷ Dowse claimed that as the ILP increased its co-operation with the CP, its relations with Labour deteriorated. R.E. Dowse, *op cit.*, p193

¹⁸ *The Proposed United Front* (Labour Party Publication, 1934) pp1 and 3

¹⁹ The level of opposition to these circulars is 'difficult to measure'. Many trades councils supported or opposed them out of apathy or by default. The CP named twenty opposed but many retracted their opposition. Some were actively opposed to it and tried to defeat it. Eleven trades councils refusing to operate the circulars were erased from the list. Most came into line as they realised the need of national recognition and that they could not win.

vilified in the Communist press. As the ILP was the POUM's sister party, this inevitably led to acrimony between the British parties, and the Unity Campaign disintegrated.²⁰

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As David Blaazer pointed out, the united and popular fronts were very different in their analyses of fascism and, consequently, their proposals for defeating it.²¹ Underlying the united front strategy was the belief that fascism was the product of capitalist crisis and that any capitalist society was susceptible to it. Fascism represented the last ditch attempt of the ruling class to retain its power in societies that appeared to be disintegrating due to severe economic depression. To eliminate fascism, it was believed that capitalism would have to be replaced with socialism, thus only socialist parties should co-operate. The popular front strategy, by contrast, envisioned an alliance of what Blaazer deemed 'progressives': in other words, socialists, Communists, liberals and even, in some versions of the strategy, 'progressive' Conservatives. The popular front was based on the idea that fascism was a threat to democracy and that all democratic forces needed to combine in order to defeat it. Crucially, the idea that fascism was inherent to capitalism and could not be defeated without overthrowing capitalism was jettisoned. Thus, as George Orwell, a critic of the popular front, wrote, fascism had to be

A. Clinton, *The Trade Union Rank and File. Trades Councils in Britain, 1900-40* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1977) pp151-2

²⁰ These events caused a great deal of controversy at the time and some historians have let their political partisanship obscure the historical actuality. Jim Fyrth wrote: 'In May [1937] some Anarchist groups in Barcelona rose in armed revolt to prevent this centralisation, [by the government] and were supported by the ultra-left POUM, which wanted to overthrow the Popular Front government in a Soviet-style revolution'. (J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1986) p85) This is the untruth disseminated by the Communist propaganda machine at the time. Most historians agree now that the fighting started when armed government troops attempted to seize the Barcelona telephone exchange from the CNT. The disturbances that followed were then used as an excuse to blame and suppress the POUM. To be fair, though, Fyrth was not a complete Stalinist apologist. He conceded that there was repression in the Republican government, although this was due to the stresses of civil war and so forth. Whilst Russia was the main supplier of arms to the Republic 'the introduction into Spain of the politics of the "great purge" weighed on the other side of the scales' (p188).

Noreen Branson repeated these falsehoods in the same year saying the POUM 'actually tried to stage a revolt against the popular front government behind the lines [...]'. (N. Branson, 'Myths from Right and Left', in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p127). However, she did get the events sparking the 'Maydays' more or less correct in her history of the CP published in the same year, though the POUM was still castigated for its divisive tactics and policy. (N. Branson, op cit., p236)

Mike Squire's study is also hamstrung by the same crude political outlook.

M. Squires, *The Aid to Spain Movement in Battersea, 1936-1939* (Elmfield Publications, 1994)

For a short but accurate account of the Maydays see P. Preston, *A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War* (Fontana Press, 2nd edition, 1996) p185

For an eye-witness account, see 'Homage to Catalonia' in G. Orwell, *Orwell in Spain* (Penguin, 2001) pp103-127

²¹ D. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992) passim

This point was not lost on some other historians, such as John Campbell who noted that the popular front was the 'opposite strategy' to the united front.

J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987) p75

depicted as 'a kind of meaningless wickedness, an aberration, "mass sadism", the sort of thing that would happen if you suddenly let loose an asylum full of homicidal maniacs'.²²

However, this theoretical contradistinction did not inform the views of all united front advocates. Communists, and many on the Labour left, saw the united front of working class parties as a prerequisite for a successful popular front.²³ In 1936, Communist leader Palme Dutt claimed that the united front would form the 'inner core' of a popular front coalition.²⁴ This was the crucial difference between the Communist approach and that of the ILP, which would not contemplate association with capitalist parties. Orwell, who had served in Spain in the POUM militia wrote: 'The People's Front is only an idea, but it has already produced the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa magnates, publishers, duchesses, and Labour MPs marching arm in arm to the tune of "Rule Britannia"'.²⁵ The popular front was another issue that bitterly divided the main left parties. The CP's acceptance of the popular front, which necessitated class collaboration, allowed the ILP to criticise it from a left wing position.²⁶

²² 'Spilling the Spanish Beans' in G. Orwell, op cit., p220

Later in the same article he described this '*News Chronicle* [a liberal newspaper] version of fascism' as 'a kind of homicidal mania peculiar to Colonel Blimps bombinating in the economic void [...]' (p222)

²³ Contemporaries sometimes confused, either deliberately or inadvertently, the two very different concepts of the united and popular fronts. There is also some confusion in historical studies of the period, though this is perhaps not surprising as Cripps himself referred to his proposals as 'the case for Unity'. (*Tribune*, 20/1/39 supplement, pi). Fyrth rightly pointed out that Cripps' memorandum proposed 'united action by all anti-Fascists' [my emphasis]. This is confusing though, as Fyrth went on to write that Cripps' supporters were expelled from the Labour Party for the 'pursuit of a *united front* of all anti-Fascists' [my emphasis]. (J. Fyrth, op cit., pp283 and 289). These complications can lead to problems for some. Jones reported that in January 1939 Cripps made a 'last desperate attempt to revive the Unity Campaign'. Whilst Cripps talked of 'Unity', he was not referring to the actual 1937 Unity Campaign. Jones thought that he was referring to this, and that the Unity Campaign was a popular front (rather than a united front) as he went on to say that this was the 'People's Front policy' that the Labour leaders 'had buried in 1937'.

M. Jones, *Michael Foot* (Gollancz, 1995) p73

²⁴ D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p274

E.J. Hobsbawm used similar language in describing the popular front strategy. The popular front was 'a set of concentric circles of unity: at its centre the united front of the working class movement, which in turn formed the basis of an even broader anti-fascist people's front, which in turn provided in the relevant countries the base for a national front of all those determined to resist fascism [...], and finally - even more loosely - an international front of governments and peoples - including the USSR - against fascism and war. Each of these circles had, as it were, a different degree of unity'.

E. Hobsbawm, 'Fifty Years of People's Fronts', in J. Fyrth (ed.), op cit., p240

²⁵ Review of F. Brockway, *The Workers' Front*, in *New English Weekly*, 17/2/38, quoted in S. Orwell & I. Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. I* (Secker & Warburg, 1968) p305

Orwell wrote: 'After what I have seen in Spain I have come to the conclusion that it is futile to be anti-fascist while attempting to preserve capitalism. Fascism after all is only a development of capitalism, and the mildest democracy, so-called, is liable to turn into Fascism when the pinch comes'.

Orwell letter to Geoffrey Gorer, 15/9/37 in G. Orwell, op cit., p251

²⁶ The ILP advocated, in place of the popular front, a 'workers front' of socialist parties organised on a federal basis. However, the ILP leader, Fenner Brockway, did not completely reject the popular front tactic. He argued that in France and Spain the popular front was the correct *temporary* tactic for purely election purposes. This

The popular front strategy was pioneered in France by Communists and Socialists in 1934. A threatened fascist coup was defeated by demonstrations and a general strike called jointly by Socialists and Communists in February 1934. Formal agreement between the parties came in July 1934. Three months later the French CP adopted a programme for an alliance of all progressive and democratic forces under the banner of a people's front. The 'Dimitrov resolution', passed at the Seventh World Communist Congress in July-August 1935, brought the international Communist movement into line with these developments.²⁷ A popular front government was elected in Spain in 1936. The Spanish left suspected that the previous Catholic Conservative government was on the verge of implementing a version of fascism and the savagery of the repression of the Asturias revolt in 1934 had lent credence to this fear. Consequently, Liberal and Socialist parties combined to defeat the government in the February 1936 elections. Even many CNT members, who had previously campaigned for abstention at elections, voted for popular front candidates. Three months later, a French popular front government was elected.

In Britain, the urgent need was to defeat the National Government which, with its developing appeasement policies of the late thirties, was seen as pro-fascist. A popular front government, led by Labour but including Liberals (and with Communists, in some versions) would commit Britain to building up a peace block of countries, an alliance with France, Russia, America and other democracies, which could halt fascist expansionism. In Britain, 1936 and 1937 were years in which the united front was to the forefront of the left's political agenda but this altered as the international situation deteriorated. The British popular front campaign took on definite form on 20 March 1938 when Sydney Elliott, editor of the national Co-operative newspaper *Reynold's News*, began a campaign for a United Peace Alliance (in effect a popular front). The liberal *News Chronicle* stated its approval and the Co-operative Party conference passed a resolution supporting the proposal in April 1938. The Liberal leader

was due to the proportional second ballot system both countries operated which meant that united (or workers') front candidates would stand down in second ballots if Radicals secured more votes than them in the first ballot (and vice-versa). Brockway thought the popular front the wrong tactic for a *permanent* alliance and completely wrong in the case of Britain with its first-past-the-post voting system.

See F. Brockway, *The Worker's Front*, especially pp154-5 and 238

Dowse thought that the 'worker's front' policy was as sectarian as the CP had been in the late twenties and 'futile' as the ILP had no contact with the working class.

R.E. Dowse, op cit., pp194, 198 and 201

²⁷ Some recent studies still persist in dating the CP's move away from the revolutionary road as beginning in 1935. Branson rightly pointed out that the policy passed in 1935 was not a 'watershed' but it, to a large extent, merely confirmed policy changes of the previous two years.

N. Branson, op cit., p125 and N. Redfern, 'The British Communist Party, Imperialism and War, 1935-45', Ph.D. Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University (1997) *passim*

Archibald Sinclair and three Liberal MPs had been favourable to the proposals since 1936 and in May 1938 the Liberal Party backed the popular front.

However, the Labour Party remained opposed to the popular front. Four Labour left wingers presented a popular front memorandum to the NEC in early May 1938, but the proposals were rejected (by sixteen votes to four) and other NEC members drew up a reply entitled *Labour and the Popular Front*. This became the most important official Labour statement on the popular front. Yet there was considerable support for the popular front in the Labour League of Youth (LLY) which formed a youth popular front in spring 1938 with the Universities Labour Federation, the YCL, Young Liberal Association and League of Nations Union youth group. The LLY, whose leadership was dominated by Communists, had its conference cancelled and central committee altered by the Labour leadership, which effectively emasculated it. Tired of the Labour Party attitude, Ted Willis, the LLY leader, and many leading officers resigned and joined the YCL in June 1939, taking many LLY branches with them.

The situation immediately after the Munich settlement, when Chamberlain brokered an agreement allowing Nazi Germany to take a large portion of Czechoslovakia on the pretext that it was largely populated by Germans, provided more opportunities for the popular front. Hugh Dalton met with dissident Tories to discuss strategy on a vote in the Commons on the Munich settlement and some Conservatives subsequently abstained. The Liberal Party restated its support of the popular front in the wake of Munich. The agitation also bore fruit in terms of the results of two by-elections after the Munich settlement. In October 1938, A.D. Lindsay, a progressive candidate supported by Liberals, Labour and some Tory dissidents like Harold Macmillan, drastically reduced the Conservative majority at Oxford. Then in November, the independent progressive (i.e. popular front) candidate, Vernon Bartlett, beat the incumbent Tory in an election dominated by the Munich agreement and foreign policy.²⁸ The events of October 1938 forced the issue in the Labour Party too, but the NEC still rejected the popular front and instead organised a joint campaign with the Co-operative Party. The Co-operative Party had proposed this campaign after rejecting a proposal that it should organise an emergency conference on the Peace Alliance. Not only had the events at Munich had little impact on majority thinking on the NEC, the Co-operative Party itself was becoming uneasy.

The campaign to promote the popular front policy inside the Labour Party came to a climax in early 1939. Stafford Cripps, the most prominent leader of the Labour left, submitted

²⁸ See R. Eatwell, 'Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.6, No.4 (1971) pp122-139 and C. Cook & J. Ramsden, *By Elections in British Politics* (UCL Press, 1997) pp112-129

a Memorandum to the Labour NEC in January 1939 proposing an electoral alliance with any anti-government parties or groups which, once in power, would negotiate with Russia and the USA and end appeasement. A late convert to the popular front, Cripps calculated that without such an alliance, the government would not be defeated at the next election due in 1939 or 1940. Predictably, the NEC rejected the proposals with all but three NEC members claiming that they were defeatist. Given their consistent opposition to working with Communists, the decision was hardly surprising. Perversely, the Labour leadership was also able to claim that they were more socialist than Cripps, as they would not co-operate with capitalist parties. Certain that the Labour rank-and-file would be more supportive, Cripps sent copies of his Memorandum to every Divisional Labour Party (DLP) and embarked on a Petition Campaign to drum up support for this proposal. The NEC, angered at Cripps' disloyalty, expelled him from the party and then ensured that Cripps' prominent supporters were either expelled or made to give pledges of support to party policy. The most prominent left wingers expelled were Trevelyan, Bevan and Strauss.

The Petition Campaign secured some left and constituency support. Whilst the precise number of signatures the Petition Campaign secured is uncertain, it was definitely far short of the hoped-for two million. There were signs that the popular front's time had passed. A popular front resolution was defeated in the Co-operative Party Congress in April 1939 by a comfortable margin. The Liberal organisation issued a circular to Liberal Associations stating that there would be no official participation in the Petition Campaign, although individual Liberals could co-operate. The Petition Campaign foundered at the 1939 Whitsun Labour conference where the expelled Cripps was permitted to defend his behaviour. His long anticipated appearance disappointed his supporters since instead of making an impassioned appeal for Labour to lead a popular front, Cripps chose to make a dull and legalistic speech claiming that he had the right under party rules to behave in the manner that he had. His expulsion was heavily endorsed and the popular front resolution defeated. This effectively ended the campaign for a popular front in Britain. The National Union of Allied and Distributive Workers (NUDAW) was the only sizeable trade union to support the reinstatement of Cripps (the SWMF also supported Cripps, but it was outvoted in the MFGB). Much impetus for the popular front was lost when the Spanish Republic fell on 30 March 1939. It also appeared at this stage that perhaps the government was moving away from appeasement of its own volition. The government's procrastination in the drawn-out negotiations with the Soviet Union over the summer of 1939 revealed this to be a false dawn.

Rationale, Sources and Methodology

There are few studies of the united and popular fronts in Britain and those that do exist leave some questions untouched or undeveloped. David Blaazer, for example, did not mention the public support that these campaigns galvanised: he only concerned himself with the origins and development of the ideas behind the campaigns rather than their practical successes and failures. Roger Eatwell, James Jupp and Ben Pimlott's studies, like those of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns by Jim Fyrth and Tom Buchanan, all concentrate on events at national level.²⁹ Although they do, of course, employ regional or local examples, regional studies can throw more light on some aspects of the subject.³⁰ Commenting on north east history in the nineteenth century, Norman McCord wrote: 'It is now well accepted that regional and local studies have very important contributions to make in the interpretation of this period, and that any useful synthesis must take account of the varying experiences of different regions of the country'.³¹ It is, of course, not only nineteenth century British history that benefits from regional and local studies. From a different perspective, Stuart Macintyre thought that studies of particular localities are of value as they enable us 'to say much more about the dynamics of Communism and militant working class politics than has emerged so far from national and institutional accounts'.³²

Yet the regional studies that exist for the period do not directly examine the united and popular fronts. Peter Drake's study of Birmingham only dealt with the united and popular front campaigns as they affected and were stimulated by 'Aid Spain' campaigning. There was no attempt to isolate the united and popular front campaigns and ascertain what support they drew and their effects at local level. Drake took as his main topic the 'Aid Spain' issue and who did what and when; there is no real discussion of the extent to which the 'Aid Spain'

²⁹ D. Blaazer, op cit.; T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991); J. Fyrth, op cit.; J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982); B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* and R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit.,

³⁰ Regional studies have brought much to historiography. Several general works have employed regional studies to throw light on national developments. On the rise of Labour see, for examples, D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) and K. Laybourn & J. Reynolds, *Liberalism and the Rise of Labour, 1890-1918* (Croom Helm, Beckenham, 1984)

There have also been many useful regional studies. See, for examples, M. Savage, *The Dynamics of Working Class Politics. The Labour Movement in Preston, 1880-1940* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987) and J.W. Marriott, *The Culture of Labourism in the East End Between the Wars* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1991)

³¹ N. McCord, 'Some aspects of north east England in the nineteenth century, *Northern History*, Vol. 8 (1972) p73

³² S. Macintyre, *Little Moscovs. Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain* (Croom Helm, 1980) p17

For good discussions of the uses and pitfalls of regional history see E. Royle, 'Introduction: regions and identities' in E. Royle (ed.), *Issues of Regional Identity* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998) pp1-

campaigns can be perceived as a movement akin to an unofficial popular front and the implications of this. Hywel Francis' account of South Wales is similar in this respect (as is Squires' work on Battersea), and, although there are tantalising glimpses into aspects of this question, there is no in-depth analysis of it.³³ Dylan Murphy's thesis on the CP in the thirties contains much useful material on West Yorkshire.³⁴ However, there is still a lack of detail on the region, as Murphy's regional study was merely supplementary to the national study, his main area of enquiry. The fact that there is little to compare the north east with makes analysis quite difficult. Mason found this when writing his study, which was only the second on the General Strike in a region. Thus 'the descriptive tool is more prominent than the analytical' in his work and he called for studies of more areas, necessary for 'meaningful comparisons'.³⁵ Apart from the aforementioned works, nothing of detail relating to the united and popular fronts has been produced on any other region, although this is changing.³⁶ There is a large body of work on aspects of north east labour movement history contained in the bulletins of the North East Society for the Study of Labour History. In addition, several works deal with various aspects of political and industrial organisations and developments in the north east. There is nothing, however, that deals directly with the united or popular fronts in the region and these topics receive very little attention in the existing general studies.

This thesis is, then, a detailed study of the nature of the united front and popular fronts at regional level 1936-1939. The north east of England is a useful region on which to base a case study due to the strength of the labour movement in political and industrial terms in County Durham, Tyneside and parts of Northumberland, and because of its traditionally moderate character (when compared to, for example, Clydeside).³⁷ The viability of the united

13 and S. Berger, 'The Decline of Liberalism and the Rise of Labour: The Regional Approach', *Parliamentary History*, Vol.12, No.1 (1993) pp84-92

³³ P.D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's Response to the Spanish Civil War With Particular Reference to the Labour Movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, Birmingham University (1977); H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1984) pp146-7 and M. Squires, op cit.,

³⁴ Murphy chose to do a national study as there is a shortage of local material. Yet, the sources for a study concentrated solely on West Yorkshire appear to be better than they are for the north east.

D. L. Murphy, op cit., pp27 and 447

³⁵ A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, No.3, University of Hull, Hull, 1970) p12

³⁶ Three Ph.D. theses in progress at the moment are: Roy Egginton, 'Anti-Fascist Movements in Britain: a Social, Historical and Political Analysis', (Sheffield), Andrew Flinn, 'The United Front in the Greater Manchester Area, 1933-41' (Manchester) and David A. Stevenson, 'The Peace Movement in Sheffield, 1935-40', (Sheffield Hallam.)

³⁷ Beynon and Austrin deemed County Durham the 'classic case' of the dominance of a moderate labour tradition; 'the centre of moderation and respectable Labour politics in Britain' where 'officialdom has reigned supreme within the working class'. Robert Moore claimed Methodism and non-conformism were largely responsible for the character of the DMA's trade unionism. Methodism emphasised thrift and accepted ownership of private property. Non-conformist beliefs were based on an acceptance of the market system: they

and popular fronts can be better assessed in a region such as the north east of England with a 'moderate' political culture than, say, in South Wales with a more extreme and unusual one.³⁸ If it can be shown that the campaigns did have a significant and positive impact and exhibited potential in the north east, then it is possible that they had similar positive effects in other parts of Britain. Examination of the relations between the left parties is feasible in the north east as they were all represented. Apart from the Labour Party, the ILP and CP had a presence in the region whilst within the Labour Party, the Socialist League was more active on Tyneside than anywhere else outside of London.³⁹ Moreover, given that figures such as Emmanuel Shinwell, Hugh Dalton and Ellen Wilkinson were MPs in north east constituencies (and C.P. Trevelyan was an ex-MP who retained much influence on the Labour left), it is possible to examine their roles in more detail than has occurred in their biographies, as well as looking at other north east MPs who have not previously been written about. Regarding the popular front, this thesis concentrates on attitudes within the official labour movement: one of the main reasons for the failure of the popular front was Labour leadership hostility.⁴⁰ The extent to which regional Labour hierarchies and the rank-and-file agreed with Transport House or dissented can be examined. Though the bulk of the thesis deals with the labour movement, the attitudes of Liberals and Conservatives towards the popular front are also considered.

For the purpose of this study, the north east has been defined as that area covered by the great northern coalfield of Durham and Northumberland. There are 23 parliamentary

encouraged deference to coal owners and placed faith in arbitration and conciliation rather than confrontation. The average Durham miner subscribed to an individualist philosophy which precluded a class view of society. H. Beynon & T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (Rivers Oram Press, 1994) pxvi and R. Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1974) passim

³⁸ Of course, the north east region was not uniform. There were strong distinctions between industrial, mining and agricultural areas and these changed over time. Politically there was some diversity too. Rural Northumberland remained almost feudal and was very conservative whilst County Durham became, in 1919, the first county in Britain to have a Labour majority on the County Council. As Rowe noted, region is 'an indeterminate and fluctuating tool with which to attempt to analyse society'. (p417) D.J. Rowe, 'The North East', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume One. Regions and Communities* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990) pp415-7 and 466 There is, however, disappointingly little historical discussion of the nature of north east culture and 'regional identity'. Norman McCord dealt with regional identity almost entirely in terms of the economic development of the north east and the interests of the rich and powerful. The impact of these developments on the working class, and the extent to which there developed a recognisably distinct north east popular culture, are only hinted at.

N. McCord, 'The regional identity of north east England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in E. Royle (ed.), op cit., pp102-117

³⁹ P. Seyd, 'Factionalism Within the Labour Party. The Socialist League, 1932-37' in A. Briggs & J. Saville, *Essays In Labour History, 1918-1939, Vol.3* (Croom Helm, 1977) pp208 and 226

⁴⁰ In this thesis 'official labour movement' refers to the TUC, Labour Party and Co-operative movement and excludes those organisations outside of this; i.e. the ILP, CP and its auxiliary organisations such as the NUWM.

constituencies included in this definition.⁴¹ The scope of this north east study is valid as there were many definitions of the north east at the time. For example, the CP North East Coast district included Cumbria, as did that of the ILP. The North East Federation of Trades Councils (NEFTC) covered the same area as this thesis apart from Berwick TC.⁴² A larger north east including Berwick in the north and Darlington, The Hartlepoons, Middlesborough East and West, Stockton and Cleveland constituencies in the south would have made an area too large to be thoroughly researched.

This thesis begins in 1936, the year that saw the outbreak of war in Spain. To have begun earlier would have meant a duplication of much of Nigel Todd's work. Todd argued that the BUF was defeated in the north east by 1935 and the lack of evidence of extensive BUF activity in the area after 1935 suggests his contention was valid.⁴³ After 1935, regional left politics took on a different hue now that the immediate and obvious Blackshirt threat had been swept from the streets of north east towns. Of course, much of the archival material referred to in this thesis has been examined for the years before 1936, in order to gain necessary background information. Ending the study in late 1939, with the outbreak of war, is also explicable. The Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939 and the subsequent international Communist vacillation between support and opposition to the war 1939-1942 altered regional as well as national politics. Crucially, the popular front was a project that aimed to end appeasement and, ideally, avert war. When the war began the political landscape changed significantly.

The most important source for this thesis has been the regional press, which has proved an invaluable resource and yielded a large amount of information.⁴⁴ The local and regional press in the thirties provided commentary on political events in the area as well as political debates in the letters pages.⁴⁵ This is in marked contrast to their contemporary equivalents. The tabloidisation of the regional press means that there are now fewer and less detailed 'political'

⁴¹ They are Hexham, Wansbeck, Morpeth, Newcastle Central, West, East and North, Wallsend, Tynemouth, Blaydon, Gateshead, Jarrow, South Shields, Sunderland (a two member seat), Chester-le-Street, Consett, Durham, Houghton-le-Spring, Seaham, Sedgefield, Spennymoor, Barnard Castle and Bishop Auckland. This makes the north east directly comparable with West Yorkshire, with 22 constituencies and 23 seats.

K. Laybourn & J. Reynolds, *op cit.*, preface

⁴² Berwick was too far from the main coalfield to be included.

NEFTC Return, 1935-6 (WMRC, 292/78/44)

⁴³ Whilst Todd did, admittedly, concentrate on anti-fascism rather than the united front, much of the material would have been very similar.

N. Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) pp78-84

⁴⁴ This is the case for many studies of regions or particular conurbations. See, for example, M. McDermott, 'Irish Catholics and the British Labour Movement: A Study with Particular Reference to London 1918-1970', M.A. Thesis, University of Kent (1978) pvii

⁴⁵ Though scouring a daily newspaper for four years for information on a single topic is of course an arduous and time consuming process. If there were some means of easily putting old newspapers onto CD-ROM, this would aid the regional historian massively.

stories. Instead, newspapers tend to concentrate on sensationalist and trivial stories and more space is dedicated to more and larger photographs and visual material than was the case for their thirties counterparts.⁴⁶ It would therefore be much more difficult, if not impossible, for a historian of 2070 to write a study of contemporary politics in the north east based largely on the regional press. As McCord commented; ‘newspapers such as the *Newcastle Chronicle* provided accounts of an immense variety of activities within the region to an extent which might inspire embarrassment among their less thorough and careful successors of the late twentieth century’.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding their relative usefulness, reliance on newspapers as sources has attendant problems. ‘History stopped in 1936’, wrote Orwell.⁴⁸ He was referring to totalitarianism in general but specifically to the ‘lies’ printed in the Spanish press: ‘I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various “party lines”’.⁴⁹ Though, hopefully, the regional press did not indulge in complete fabrication, it was still, like the press everywhere, coloured by political partisanship of one form or another.⁵⁰ The *Sunderland Echo*, for example, was owned by Samuel Storey, the Conservative MP for Sunderland, and consequently had a Conservative bias. All the major north east papers had a Liberal or Conservative bias and revealed their partisanship in editorials, particularly at election times.⁵¹ Mason, though deeming newspapers ‘one of the most

⁴⁶ However, this was part of a longer term process that made the regional press in the thirties less useful for the political historian than that of, say, the turn of the century. Amalgamations meant that, whilst in 1906 there were 46 papers in the region (33 weeklies, 12 dailies and 1 bi-weekly) there were only 31 (23 weeklies, 7 dailies and 1 bi-weekly) in 1939. In addition, these were increasingly owned by less companies. By 1939 there were two main rivals in the region: Allied Newspapers (Kemsley) and the Northcliffe chain. There remained very few small family-run titles (such as the *Hexham Courant*) and some towns, including Jarrow and Gateshead, did not have their own paper in the thirties. The market demanded the implementation of ‘new journalism’ which, combined with the change from local proprietorship to national groupings, meant that local and national politics ceased to be the main concern.

F. Manders, ‘History of the Newspaper Press in North east England’ in P. Isaac (ed.), *Newspapers in the North east. The ‘Fourth Estate’ at Work in Northumberland and Durham* (Allenholme Press, Wylam, Tyneside, 1999) pp1-14

See also S.J. Plouman, ‘Developments in the Newspaper Press of Northumberland and Durham, 1906-1939’, Ph.D. Thesis, Newcastle University (1980)

⁴⁷ N. McCord in E. Royle (ed.), op cit., p107

⁴⁸ ‘Looking Back on the Spanish War’, in G. Orwell, op cit., p351

⁴⁹ Ibid., p352

⁵⁰ C. Kaul, ‘The Press’, in B. Brivati, J. Buxton & A. Seldon, *The Contemporary History Handbook* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996) pp298-310

⁵¹ M. Milne, *The Newspapers of Northumberland and Durham* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1971)

Curiously, the political bias of the regional press did not necessarily anger Labour Party members. For example, Henry Bolton, an important Labour left wing leader, praised the *Blaydon Courier* for not being partisan at a Mayday meeting in 1938. (*Blaydon Courier*, 13/5/38, p1). This was despite the fact that the paper’s editorial comment was invariably right wing. For example, Chamberlain received praise after the Munich settlement and the regular commentary from ‘Quid Nunc’ was invariably right wing too.

Blaydon Courier, 7/10/38, p3; 16/1/37 p15 and 30/1/37, p10

valuable sources for modern history' also highlighted this, especially when studying local labour history.⁵² For Labour, there was effectively only the *Gateshead Labour Herald*, the paper of Gateshead Labour Party.⁵³

In addition to this crude and obvious political partisanship is the fact that journalists view events through their own personal 'prism'. Most would have shared a similar world view, and every event reported is refracted through this. Thus reports often appeared on labour movement meetings or events that were clearly written by someone with little knowledge, either practical or theoretical, of the labour movement and left politics.⁵⁴ Added to these more perennial problems, is the fact that many reports in the north east newspapers of the period were either lacking in detail or simply factually wrong. For example, names of individuals or organisations present at a political meeting were sometimes misspelled. The amount of detail provided on any given event varied enormously from paper to paper and even between individual reports within a particular paper. Lack of detail in the reports of some key political events has proved very frustrating (examples of these have been referred to in the footnotes in various chapters). It is also difficult to determine what events that may have had significance for this study did not make the press at all. The maxim 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence' is pertinent here, though a slightly modified version 'absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence' seems more appropriate to the regional historian.⁵⁵

Another aspect of some newspaper reports deserves comment. A feature of some of the lesser newspapers, particularly the weeklies, was that they carried reports that had evidently been written by the protagonists. For examples, the *Blaydon Courier* carried regular reports on Economic League meetings that appeared to have been written by the organisation

Presumably, like the *Newcastle Journal*, all newspapers had, in order to survive in the inter-war years, 'to appeal to a wider readership including all political persuasions in the region'

M. Preston, 'The *Newcastle Journal*, 1832-1950' in P. Isaac (ed.), op cit., p135

⁵² The *Newcastle Journal* and *Newcastle Chronicle* both opposed the General Strike and consistently denigrated labour policies and organisations both before and after the nine days.

A. Mason, op cit., p101

See also J. Leonard, 'The North Eastern Daily Gazette and the General Strike', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.4 (1970) pp19-21

⁵³ Of course, the left, 'non-capitalist' press was as likely to indulge in propaganda. The *Daily Worker* was particularly proficient at publishing reports that sometimes bore almost no resemblance at all to the events they purported to be covering. For example, the coverage of the Spanish civil war, especially the role of the POUM and anarchists. For a brilliant exposé of *Daily Worker* fabrications on this subject, see 'Homage to Catalonia' in G. Orwell, op cit., pp198-215

⁵⁴ This problem is not restricted to journalists, as 'liberal' historians often suffer from it too. For a penetrating discussion of the way in which a liberal historian distorts that which he or she cannot understand (in this case the Spanish revolution), see N. Chomsky, 'Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship' in N. Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (Pelican Books, 1971) pp62-105

⁵⁵ On saying that, the minutes of trade unions and Labour Parties often recorded in some detail the nature of circulars they received advertising meetings. Thus, a combination of several trade union minute books should give a good idea of all the important meetings and events that occurred.

and printed verbatim.⁵⁶ Similarly, the *Durham Chronicle* published detailed reports on the regular meetings of the Willington Socialist Society. These reports generally included a detailed account of what Charles Wilson, the chief speaker at these events, said, plus the full names of all those who participated in the subsequent debate.⁵⁷ Written by individuals in political organisations with an obvious political end in mind, reports such as these should be handled with as much care as reports from supposedly neutral journalists.

Anthony Mason later realised that he had been 'wildly optimistic' when he began his study of the General Strike in the north east as he had hoped to find the complete records of the proceedings of at least one strike committee.⁵⁸ Similarly misplaced optimism characterised my attitude at the outset. Unfortunately, I found no trace of the minutes of local united front and popular front committees, nor of the minutes of any of the various local 'Aid Spain' campaigns. This is a relatively common problem for the regional historian. McDermott, for example, found local Labour Party minutes were badly kept, sparse and hard to locate.⁵⁹ Mason provided several reasons for the lack of material relating to grass roots working class history. Firstly, when secretaries of labour movement organisations changed, so papers were sorted and often thrown away. Moreover, many trade union branches had no permanent accommodation or full time officials and thus there was a lot of pressure to dispose of bulky and apparently useless material.⁶⁰ Some minutes of trades union branches and records of local Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties have survived, however, and have been of various degrees of usefulness, as have the minutes of Gateshead Socialist League. The minutes of municipal councils and UDCs generally merely record decisions, giving no idea of the nature of each debate nor of who voted for what. They are consequently only of limited use to the historian. The best way of finding out what happened inside councils is to refer to the press, but normally council business had to be particularly controversial before it was reported.⁶¹ The collections of north east individuals' papers have largely proved disappointing. Ellen Wilkinson's material is merely a handful of scrap books of newspaper cuttings. There is more in the Hugh Dalton collection, though these have been well covered by his biographer Ben Pimlott. Jack Lawson's papers largely consist of hand-written sermons and little else. There is little that relates to the nineteen thirties in the papers of Chuter Ede MP and Sam Watson. The

⁵⁶ For example, see *Blaydon Courier*, 3/7/37, pp5 & 6

⁵⁷ For example, see Wilson's speech on Dr John Wilson (an earlier DMA leader) in *Durham Chronicle*, 2/7/37, pp3 and 7

⁵⁸ A. Mason, op cit., pvi

However, Mason did find a useful account of the Northumberland and Durham Joint Strike committee (p12).

⁵⁹ M. McDermott, op cit., pvii

⁶⁰ A. Mason, op cit., p100

C.P. Trevelyan Papers are better as they contain Trevelyan's correspondence with his wife, which is often illuminating. Likewise, from a very different political perspective, Cuthbert Headlam's diary has been useful. Again, this problem is quite common as even the papers of high profile, national figures are sometimes of limited utility. In his study of Attlee in the thirties John Swift complained that Attlee's personal papers were a 'skimpy' source.⁶² Beyond this, national records of trades unions, political parties and individuals have been referred to as necessary. These have yielded some useful information on the regional situation and on particular localities and individuals. The CP archive and especially the files on individual CP members at the Labour History Museum in Manchester, is a noteworthy example of this. Most of these sources require meticulous and time consuming study before the gems of relevant information can be extracted.

Oral history has also been valuable, although of course this is increasingly difficult for the thirties as many who could have thrown light on the period have died or become too ill to be interviewed in recent years.⁶³ For this study, I conducted tape recorded interviews with Len Edmondson of the ILP and Harry Clarke of the CP, using structured questionnaires. Both were intelligent and engaging interviewees who provided a great deal of interesting and useful material that cannot be gained in any other way.⁶⁴ In addition, I have referred to interviews conducted for previous studies on similar topics with Frank Graham of the CP and Jack Lawther of the Labour Party. Other recorded interviews were available, mostly from Dr Ray Challinor who kindly lent me copies of those he conducted with several north east labour movement veterans. The Imperial War Museum archive in London has recorded interviews with many International Brigade volunteers. Transcripts of interviews with contemporaries appear in some publications. The national and regional printed and manuscript materials combined with oral testimony have provided a very varied base of primary material. Yet this material is still sparse in places and consequently there are several unavoidable blank areas. This seems to be an occupational hazard for the regional historian: Mason's study of the north east did not yield 'a uniform amount of material'.⁶⁵ It will be noted, as with Masons' work, that much of the discussion deals with Tyneside and particularly Newcastle. The prominence of

⁶¹ See, for example, the disputes in Jarrow UDC discussed in chapter two.

⁶² J. Swift, *op cit.*, p8

⁶³ Sadly, Jack Lawther died in 1998. I had been fortunate enough to interview him for previous research and was hoping to talk to him again. Bill Rounce, who was important in Jarrow labour movement, also died in recent years.

See R. Perks & A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge, 1998) *passim* and M. Roper, 'Oral History' in B. Brivati, J. Buxton & A. Seldon, *op cit.*, pp345-352

⁶⁴ This contrasts with Mason's experience. Some of his interviewees confused events.
A. Mason, *op cit.*, p101

Newcastle is explicable as it was the 'quasi-metropolitan' regional hub of a large part of Northumberland and Durham and it dominated the region in the socio-cultural sphere.⁶⁶

This thesis comprises eight chapters structured in a part thematic and part chronological manner. Chapter one examines united and popular front activity in the north east in 1936. Chapter two discusses divisions within the official labour movement in the region and the implications this had for the united and popular fronts. The attitude of Catholics is examined in chapter three, and the Unity Campaign and its wider effects are considered in chapter four. The final four chapters deal with aspects of the popular front: the United Peace Alliance campaign of 1938; the Cripps Petition campaign of 1939; Liberal and Conservative attitudes to the popular front and, finally, a case study of the Tyneside foodship.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p100

⁶⁶ Ibid., p12

See also D.M. Goodfellow, *Tyneside. The Social Facts* (Co-operative Printing Society, Newcastle, second edition, 1941) p77

As will be seen, the majority of the largest political meetings organised on a national basis were held in Newcastle, though venues in Gateshead and Sunderland were also used.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Smash the Means Test! Save Spain!'; United and Popular Front Activity on the Home and Foreign Fronts, 1936 - January, 1937

Between 1933 and 1936, united front activity in the north east, as nationally, occurred around two basic issues: unemployment and anti-fascism. Communists and members of the ILP and Labour Party physically confronted fascists on the streets of north east towns.¹ Members of all three parties and non-aligned individuals were also active in the Communist inspired National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). United front activity continued nationally in 1936. The anti-fascist united front was exemplified by the Battle of Cable Street in London, in October 1936, when a planned BUF march was opposed by a huge counter-demonstration.² There was also continued united front co-operation over campaigns against the Means Test.³ The outbreak of war in Spain in July 1936 with the revolt of a large section of the Spanish military supported by Hitler and Mussolini, provided the left with another cause around which the united and popular fronts could organise.⁴ The Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC) was established by a group of Socialist and Communist doctors in August 1936 and this stimulated the formation of local SMACs.

Several historians have commented positively on co-operation between Communists and Labour Party members at grass roots level in the late thirties. Noreen Branson claimed that the 'rock-like resistance of the Labour leadership to united action with Communists was in practice undermined all over the country in the years 1936-1939'.⁵ John Swift argued that there was so much united front activity that it was 'essentially impossible' for a Labour

¹ For details of anti-fascist activities in the north east in the early thirties see N. Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995)

² Murphy has shown that the CP leadership was opposed to this march and only threw its weight behind it when threatened with splitting the CP in the east end. The CP leadership's attitude to this particular anti-BUF demonstration was a reflection of their previous attitude. Murphy argued that rank-and-file Communists were far more interested in combating the BUF on the ground than was their national leadership. Communist leaders thought that the government represented the real fascist threat.

D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p441

³ The Unemployment Insurance Act, 1935 reduced scales of unemployment relief and introduced a new uniform Means Test regulated by a complicated formula. January 1935 saw the beginning of huge and militant nation-wide opposition to this new act. The government was forced to suspend the new relief scales, though the measures were not jettisoned completely.

R. Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence. A History of the National Unemployed Workers Movement, 1920-46* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1987) pp167-9

⁴ Generally speaking, the united and popular fronts have been dealt with separately in this thesis. However, as there was no wide-based campaign for the popular front before the United Peace Alliance campaign, both united and popular front activities have been taken together before 1938.

politician to work without coming into contact with Communists.⁶ Willie Thompson, James Hinton and Kevin Morgan made similar claims, though none estimated the extent of this co-operation.⁷ According to John Callaghan, however, 'many thousands' of Labour members co-operated with Communists in the late thirties.⁸ The CP, claimed Neil Redfern, achieved 'considerable success' in its attempts to build unity with Labour Party members.⁹ This chapter will assess these claims by examining the united and popular fronts in the north east as they functioned in a range of campaigns and organisations viz. Communist affiliation to Labour, anti-Means Test, NUWM Hunger March, Spanish civil war, peace councils, Left Book Club (LBC), trade union work and at municipal elections. These areas of activity will be scrutinised in turn in order to provide a context for examining and assessing the united and popular front campaigns in the region, 1937-1939.

The Campaign for Communist Affiliation to Labour

The practical issue facing the official labour movement around the united front, debated throughout 1936, was that of CP affiliation to the Labour Party. So important was this area of activity that Dylan Murphy deemed this campaign the 'main plank' of the CP's initial popular front strategy.¹⁰ Immediately after the 1935 general election result, the CP applied to affiliate to Labour for the fifth time in its history. The NEC replied, on 27 January 1936, that there remained irreconcilable differences. Nationally, the Communist application received some official support including that of the Socialist League, Fabian Society and left intellectual G.D.H. Cole. By mid-June 1936, 906 labour movement organisations were in favour of the proposal and this figure rose to 1,400 three months later.¹¹

A significant success for the affiliation campaign in the north east was the support it gained from two of the most important unions in terms of membership and influence, the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) and Northumberland Miners' Association (NMA). At the Miners' Federation (MFGB) conference, the resolution to support Communist affiliation was

⁵ N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p156

⁶ J. Swift, 'Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40', Ph.D. Thesis, Lancaster University (1997) p271

⁷ W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism, 1920-1991* (Pluto, 1992) p57; J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism. A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974* (Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1983) p157 and K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989) p36

⁸ J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt. A Study in British Stalinism* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1993) p166

⁹ N. Redfern, 'The British Communist Party, Imperialism and War, 1935-45', Ph.D. Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University (1997) p33

¹⁰ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p247

¹¹ This included 831 trades union branches, 407 local Labour Party branches, about 60 DLPs, the AEU, MFGB and ASLEF and three smaller trades unions.

K. Laybourn & D. Murphy, *Under the Red Flag. A History of Communism in Britain, 1849-1991* (Sutton, Stroud, 1999) p86 and D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp209-215

submitted by the South Wales (SWMF) and Derbyshire miners. The DMA financial secretary, Edward Moore, seconded the resolution moved by Arthur Horner (SWMF) and it was passed by 283,000 votes to 238,000, with both the north east miners' unions voting in favour.¹² The DMA decision to support Communist affiliation was particularly significant as the union had a reputation for political moderation within the labour movement.¹³ On the political wing of the movement, Durham DLP decided to support Communist affiliation in early August 1936.¹⁴

These were, however, the only official labour movement organisations that left evidence of their support. The north east miners' stance obviously had not had a significant influence on the DLPs. In fact, it had had little influence on other trade unions in the region too, as the important North East Federation of Trades Councils (NEFTC), which claimed to represent 500,000 trade unionists, opposed affiliation.¹⁵ An NEFTC delegate meeting in February 1936 was reminded of their March 1935 resolution encouraging all trades councils 'to oppose in every way contact with Communist or other disruptive bodies'.¹⁶ The remaining north east DLPs that left evidence of their decisions all opposed affiliation, although the voting margins varied from a very narrow majority in Morpeth DLP to a large majority in Sedgefield DLP. Seaham DLP also decided against Communist affiliation but the actual margin of the vote went unrecorded.¹⁷ As far as is known then, only Durham DLP supported Communist affiliation, hardly evidence of significant support for the CP and the united front in the north east. This evidence confirms the accepted picture that support for Communist affiliation in Britain as a whole was confined largely to Communist strongholds in Scotland, London, South

¹² The DMA had 113,000 votes and the NMA had 29,000 at MFGB conference. This roughly reflected their respective memberships.

MFGB AR, 1936 (DRO, D/EBF92/25)

¹³ During the General Strike, the DMA was the only union not to be officially represented on the Northumberland and Durham Joint Strike committee. Will Lawther represented the union in an unofficial capacity.

J.F. Clarke, 'The General Strike on Tyneside', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.9 (1975) p4 and A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, No.3, University of Hull, Hull, 1970) p102

¹⁴ Durham DLP Minutes, 1/8/36 (DRO, D/SHO/93/2)

¹⁵ NEFTC Minutes, 8/2/36 (WMRC, 292/78/44)

It is unclear where the figure of 500,000 came from, but it featured in almost every newspaper report that dealt with the NEFTC in the late thirties. In its return of 1935-6 the NEFTC claimed to have 14 affiliated trades councils with 30,000 members. The aggregate of the individual memberships of affiliated TCs in this period suggests the figure of 30,000 is accurate (less than a tenth of the publicly claimed 500,000). Thus it seems likely that the figure of 500,000 was the total of all trade unionists in the north east and was reached by adding the memberships of all the unions in the region, including, most importantly, DMA (125,000), NMA (30,000), NUGMW (50,000) and TGWU (40,000). It was disingenuous of the NEFTC to claim to represent all these workers who were not, in fact, affiliated to the organisation.

NEFTC Return, 1935-6 (WMRC, 292/78/44)

¹⁶ NEFTC Circular, 7/3/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/13)

¹⁷ *Daily Worker*, 3/8/36, p3; *North Mail*, 18/9/36, p3; 28/9/36, p2; *Sunderland Echo*, 28/9/36, p4; *Newcastle Journal*, 28/9/36, p7; *Durham Chronicle*, 18/9/36, p7; 25/9/36, p4 and 2/10/36 p3

Wales and Lancashire. At the 1936 Labour Party conference, the affiliation proposal was defeated 592,000 to 1,728,000 votes against. This was the largest vote in a Labour conference in favour of a CP proposal, but it was still far from sufficient for success. Between 250,000 and 400,000 pro-affiliation votes that had been expected did not materialise, possibly due to the adverse effects of the first of the Show Trials in Soviet Russia.¹⁸ The Show Trials may have been a factor in explaining the small amount of support the official north east labour movement gave the proposal, but there is no direct evidence of this in 1936.

However, the issue did stimulate some regional united front activity. There was a united front conference at Chester-le-Street organised by the Socialist League branch in late July 1936. The conference unanimously passed a resolution which proposed Communist affiliation since the interests of all workers could only be protected by unity: 'A striking example has been shown by our French comrades, who in a short space of time have swept away the forces of fascism and reaction [...]'¹⁹ The conference was attended by representatives from both official and unofficial sections of the labour movement. On the unofficial side were three NUWM branches. The official side was represented by five DMA lodges, one NUGMW, one Co-operative Guild and one Labour Party and women's section branch. However, this was an isolated phenomenon as there is no evidence of similar conferences happening in other localities. For example, there were no mentions of the Communist affiliation issue in Gateshead Socialist League executive minutes.²⁰ With the exception of the miners' unions, the incorporation of the CP within the official labour movement was not well supported by the official north east labour movement in 1936. Furthermore, as the miners' unions and Durham DLP were to demonstrate, even theoretical support for Communist affiliation did not necessarily translate into involvement in united front activity with the CP.

Fighting the Means Test

There were some examples of practical united front activity in the region based around campaigns against the Means Test and initiated by the NUWM. In late February 1936 there was an 'all in' NUWM conference of the 'Employed and Unemployed Unity Committee' in Felling to organise mass protests against the unemployment regulations. The official labour movement was 'fairly well represented' by Felling TC, the builder's union (AUBTW) and

¹⁸ N. Branson, op cit., pp151-155; B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977) pp87-8; A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Macmillan, 1997) pp92-3 and D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp228-231

¹⁹ This was an example of the united front being depicted as synonymous with the popular front government in France.

Chester-le-Street Chronicle, 31/7/36, p6 and *Durham County Advertiser*, 31/7/36, p2

²⁰ Gateshead Socialist League EC Minutes (TWAS, PO/SLI/1)

National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers (NUDAW) branches, Felling miners' lodge and individual Labour Party members.²¹ The CP, and even the local Disabled ex-Servicemen's organisation, were represented. At the conference most delegates expressed the desire that Felling should take the lead in convening a Tyneside conference. To this end a further conference was arranged and a 'Unity Committee' was established.

Yet this example is the only one for the region in 1936 that exists in the TUC files, suggesting that this kind of united front activity was exceptional. Moreover, involvement of Felling TC in this activity did not indicate its support of a united front with Communists. The trades council chairperson, who had been absent from the meeting which had appointed delegates to the conference, had always said the organisation could not be officially represented at the event. Some Felling TC members thought that, although the conference had been called by the NUWM, the Black Circular was not relevant as the broadness of the committee would prevent the NUWM 'from dominating and exploiting its position formally'.²² Another example of a united front around domestic issues came in early August 1936 when Alfred Denville MP (Newcastle Central) received a deputation of unemployed representatives of the 'united front established against the Means Test regulations'.²³ This appears to be the totality of evidence of official labour movement organisations involved with NUWM campaigns before the NUWM Hunger March of autumn 1936.

Nevertheless, in the same month, there was an ostensible indication that the official movement was becoming more favourably disposed to working with Communists. The DMA organised twelve mass demonstrations against the Means Test and the new Unemployment Assistance Board (UAB) regulations throughout County Durham.²⁴ Important DMA speakers called for a united front at some of the demonstrations. George Harvey, a DMA executive member at the time, said in his address: 'The time has gone by for the passing of resolutions; direct action is what is wanted, and that is why we are calling on Communists and every other working class organisation to close their ranks in a working class Popular Front against the Fascist National Government'.²⁵ Sam Watson, a DMA official, and Will Pearson, another

²¹ All-in conference leaflet (undated) with TUC letter to G.R.F. Adams, 21/2/36 (WMRC, 292/777.1/9)

²² G.R.F. Adams letter to Harries, 3/3/36 (WMRC, 292/777.1/9)

²³ *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 1/8/36, p9

²⁴ UABs were established as part of the government's Unemployment Insurance Act, 1935. Each UAB consisted of six members, all of whom were appointed by the government to secure effective administration of all non-insured benefit. The UAB was relatively immune to the public pressure that could be placed on the PAC.

R. Croucher, op cit., pp167-9

²⁵ The 'working class Popular Front' was presumably what is defined as a united front in this thesis. This illustrates the difficulties present in any definition of the two very different terms.

Sunderland Echo, 17/8/36, p7

executive member, echoed Harvey's words elsewhere.²⁶ Watson, Pearson and Harvey were all on the Labour left (see below). As left wingers, their support for the united front was to be expected. But other more moderate Labour figures also expressed support for the united front at these demonstrations. At South Shields, Joe Batey MP (Spennymoor), asserted that 'The only way to deal with this Government is by a united front and a popular front, whether Labour, Radical or Socialist, of all the better and fairer minded people of this country'.²⁷ DMA official Moore seconded the resolution with an appeal for a permanent united front of all the working classes. Moore and Batey's comments are notable as both were moderates. However, their support for the united or popular fronts did not translate into practical involvement in particular campaigns and even this rhetorical support was very short lived (there are no examples of it after these demonstrations). Given that the DMA officially supported CP affiliation at the time, it was not especially controversial.

More significantly for the united front, the CP was invited to attend the demonstrations by the official movement. The Sunderland demonstration was described as a 'united front' by the local Conservative-supporting paper (the *Sunderland Echo*) as, in addition to the DMA and Sunderland and Houghton-le-Spring DLPs, the CP and NUWM were represented.²⁸ The same was true of other demonstrations, for example that at South Shields.²⁹ However, a significant regional Labour politician soon revealed that these demonstrations did not indicate a sea-change in the official labour movement's attitude towards Communists. In October, Samuel Storey MP (Conservative, Sunderland) referred to senior Labour figures sharing a platform with Communists at the August demonstrations.³⁰ Joseph Hoy, who had chaired the Sunderland demonstration, denied having 'communistic tendencies' and challenged Storey to prove that he had ever encouraged Labour to align with the CP. The DMA, Hoy argued, invited all those opposed to the UAB scales 'irrespective of political conviction [...] simply because there was a demonstration, irrespective of political colour, does not mean to say that we are treading the path of communism'.³¹ Hoy's reaction demonstrated that the DMA's inviting of Communists to its August demonstrations indicated nothing more than tolerance of Communists rather than a desire in Labour ranks to build a united front. Moreover, the events of subsequent months revealed that inviting Communists to this one set of demonstrations was

²⁶ *North Mail*, 15/8/36, p9; *Durham Chronicle*, 21/8/36, p16 and *Blaydon Courier*, 22/8/36, p8

²⁷ *Shields Gazette*, 17/8/36, p1 and *Durham Chronicle*, 21/8/36, p16

²⁸ *Sunderland Echo*, 17/8/36, p7

²⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 17/8/36, p1 and *Durham Chronicle*, 21/8/36, p16

³⁰ *Newcastle Journal*, 24/10/36, p9 and *Sunderland Echo*, 24/10/36, p3

³¹ *Sunderland Echo*, 29/10/36, p7

as far as the DMA was prepared to go to give practical expression to its support for CP affiliation to Labour.

Storey had taken two months to identify the August demonstrations in an attempt to link Labour with Communists. Yet, only two weeks after the DMA demonstrations, Labour appeared to adjust its attitude to Communists attending its demonstrations. At the end of August 1936, there were official labour movement organised anti-Means Test marches at Newcastle, Wallsend and Blyth. The report on the Newcastle demonstration noted explicitly that, though uninvited, groups of Communists joined the end of the procession. The same was true at Blyth, which was attended by a large contingent of uninvited Communists and NUWM members who sold their literature at the meeting. (There was no Communist speaker on the platform).³² Perhaps Labour had already learned the lesson that inviting Communists on demonstrations was more trouble than it was worth. Of course, Communists could not be physically excluded from demonstrations if they chose to attend, but by not explicitly inviting them Labour could more easily avoid the charge of consorting with them.

The NUWM-organised Hunger March to London in late autumn 1936 received more support from labour movement organisations and important national individuals (such as Clement Attlee) than did any previous Hunger March.³³ However, the attempt to secure official DMA support for the march, such as that provided by the SWMF, revealed the inherent weakness in the united front project in the north east.³⁴ Despite supporting the opposition to the new Means Test regulations and Communist affiliation to Labour in the summer, the DMA refused to associate itself officially with the Hunger March. The issue of DMA support for the march was initially raised inside the organisation by Follonsby and Bessie Pit lodges. At a conference in mid-September supporters of the march established a Central March Committee which included representatives from both official and unofficial labour movement organisations. Six DMA lodges, two NUGMW branches, two Women's Co-operative Guilds, two Labour Party branches, six NUWM branches, Socialist League, CP and ILP branches were represented. By mid-October the organising body was calling itself a 'United Front Committee'. It had gained eight additional DMA lodges in the intervening month whilst retaining Labour Party representatives. These strongly protested at the DMA's refusal both to have anything to do with the march and to receive a deputation on the question. On behalf of

³² *North Mail*, 31/8/36, p7; *Blyth News*, 31/8/36, p1 and 3/9/36, p4

³³ R. Croucher, op cit., pp179-181

³⁴ According to the CP, the 1934 Hunger March drew support from local Labour Parties and trades councils, although the particular organisations involved were not named. *The North East Marches On* p14 (CP North East District Committee, n.d. probably 1938 or 1939) (NPL, L329.4)

the DMA executive, Will Lawther said that lodges could put forward resolutions on the subject and seven duly did so. The DMA executive then referred these resolutions to the following DMA council meeting that was to meet a week *after* the march had started. Ryhope lodge attempted to move an emergency resolution of DMA support for the march but the chairperson ruled this out of order. The Follonsby resolution proposing that the DMA support the march by sending official representatives on it was soundly defeated in a lodge vote, 153 votes to 644 against.³⁵ The vast majority of the DMA were evidently completely opposed to this type of united front initiative, despite support for CP affiliation in the summer.³⁶

Although efforts within the DMA to secure official support for the Hunger March failed, the march itself provided some limited opportunities for united front activity. The return of the Hunger Marchers to the north east saw a 'quite revolutionary atmosphere' at Central Station, their arrival arousing a 'great deal of interest' from a 'surprisingly large and sympathetic crowd'.³⁷ There were about 90 at the Socialist Hall where the Progressive lord mayor, alderman J. Grantham, provided tea and Labour Party, CP and ILP members addressed the meeting.³⁸ There was a united front organised around the Hunger March in the Blaydon area.³⁹ At the marchers' send-off meeting, Labour MP William Whitely sent a message of wholehearted support.⁴⁰ Local Labour left winger Henry Bolton used the opportunity to call for a united front and the Communist Wilf Jobling, secretary of the local march council, also spoke.⁴¹ One of the marchers referred to the united front, claiming that the 'whole of the labour and socialist movement in Blaydon was united on that march. Every section of the

³⁵ DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 15/9/36 and 17/10/36 (DMOR); *Daily Worker*, 18/9/36, p2; *Sunderland Echo*, 21/9/36, p7; *Durham Chronicle*, 16/10/36, p12 and *Durham County Advertiser*, 23/10/36, p10

³⁶ A change in DMA rules in 1921 gave union officials more power over the lodges' decisions. Before, lodge representatives at DMA delegate meetings were instructed by the lodges on how to vote on issues. After, delegates were to report back to the lodges what was discussed at delegate meetings, and then the lodge would vote on the topic. Officials could therefore emphasise certain aspects of issues which would be reported back to lodges and influence their voting.

W.R. Garside, *The Durham Miners, 1919-1960* (George Allen & Unwin, 1971) p69

³⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 17/11/36, p5

³⁸ The labels 'Progressive' and 'Moderate' could mean either Conservative or Liberal. By 1936 Liberals and Conservatives had formed electoral pacts in the north east in order to counter the 'socialist' threat. They stood under several different titles which changed from council-to-council and even altered from year-to-year in the same council, thus making the politics of these individuals extremely difficult to determine (see chapter seven).

³⁹ *Blaydon Courier*, 10/10/36, p8

⁴⁰ Whiteley was 'said to have had Communist backing' when he won Blaydon in the 1935 general election but 'Communists at times intrude where not wanted'.

North Mail, 10/4/37, p6

⁴¹ There was a history of co-operation between the NUWM and Labour-dominated Blaydon UDC. In August 1936, Jobling spoke for a Blaydon NUWM deputation to Blaydon UDC, outlining proposals against the UAB which would 'go further than the calling of meetings and the passing of resolutions'. Bolton, the council's chairperson, said that the proposals would be 'favourably considered'.

Blaydon Courier, 22/8/36, p8

working class was behind it'.⁴² This was testified to by the large number of official movement organisations, including both trades unions and Labour Parties, which donated funds to the Blaydon March Council. On their return, there was a civic reception for the marchers. Emmie Lawther (wife of left winger Steve), spoke, saying that it had been the 'greatest experience of her life'.⁴³ However, as shall be seen, the left-dominated official labour movement in Blaydon was exceptional in the region.⁴⁴ And even in Blaydon the left did not have it all its own way: at the very same time as there was this apparent widespread official labour movement support for the Hunger March, there was a bitter dispute within the official movement over the Blaydon Socialist Sunday School (see chapter two).

Elsewhere, the Hunger March merely provided another arena for conflict between Communists and Labour, suggesting that in areas where Labour was hostile to the CP the Hunger March had no positive effects on relations between the left parties. Labour-controlled Gateshead council received a request to see an NUWM deputation calling for council support for the Hunger March. The left winger Mary Gunn moved and, surprisingly, the Catholic Norman McCretton seconded, that the deputation be received.⁴⁵ This did not indicate support for co-operation with the CP nor for this particular campaign however, as the Labour mayor then quizzed the deputation, asking them if the NUWM was not merely an 'off shoot' of the CP. The delegation denied both this and the accusation that the march was merely a 'stunt'.⁴⁶ Despite this, the council refused to donate the requested £40 and referred a request for a guarantee that marchers' dependants would still be able to receive public assistance to the PAC.⁴⁷ In Blyth, too, the Hunger March stimulated disunity and division on the left. Initially, Labour-controlled Blyth council agreed to support the Hunger March and appointed a Communist, councillor Bob Elliott, as its official representative.⁴⁸ However, a heated debate over Elliott's appointment occurred two weeks later. Predicting that the Hunger March would be used as political propaganda by the Communists, a motion revoking Elliott's appointment was passed, with only W.H. Breadin, Elliott's Communist comrade, voting against. This

⁴² Ibid., 17/10/36, p5

⁴³ Ibid., 21/11/36, p8

⁴⁴ Not every section of the Blaydon labour movement supported the Hunger March. For example, Blaydon TC, dominated by the Catholic and anti-Communist Colgan, did not donate to march funds.

Ibid., 9/1/37, p15

⁴⁵ McCretton was one of the most vocal critics of Labour's policy on the Spanish civil war in the region and a strong opponent of Communism. Perhaps he wanted the deputation to be heard so it could be given short shrift. This is, after all, what happened (see chapter three).

⁴⁶ *Newcastle Journal*, 24/9/36, p7

⁴⁷ Gateshead Council Minutes, Vol.6, 23/9/36, p748 (GPL)

⁴⁸ *North Mail*, 24/9/36, p4

provoked bitterness, with Elliott complaining that 'My politics and my attitude have been dragged in the mud'.⁴⁹

This accorded with events in Blyth three months before, when the NUWM's activities provoked conflict between Communists and Labour. A Central Area Board of Guardians meeting at Morpeth heard statements from Labour councillor John Mordue and Breadin (chairperson and vice-chairperson of Blyth Relief sub-committee respectively) regarding a NUWM demonstration at Blyth unemployment offices. Fifteen NUWM members had entered the office and demanded that a case be dealt with immediately. Breadin, stating that he knew the case well, argued that in a democracy the individual had a right to demonstrate. However, other members of the Board of Guardians claimed that such action was fruitless and tantamount to intimidation. Mordue went further by asserting that such tactics amounted to coercion. The meeting condemned the NUWM's action with Breadin the only dissenter.⁵⁰ Nothing changed after the Hunger March ended. In December there was further conflict between Mordue and Breadin, who was censured for acting without the authority of the sub-committee. Breadin thought that this was designed to curb his activities for the poor and that it 'smacked of autocracy'.⁵¹ Blyth was important as the CP was relatively strong there, having two councillors and one county councillor.⁵²

Though the CP had no councillors in Tynemouth, it was still a relatively strong force on the left as the Labour Party was weak.⁵³ Labour never had more than four councillors on Tynemouth council in the thirties and the CP came close to winning a seat several times in this

⁴⁹ *Newcastle Journal*, 9/10/36, p8 and *North Mail*, 9/10/36, p5

Elliott claimed that the march had been a practical united front and that Attlee's presence at the demonstration in London should be a lesson to Labour in Blyth to join in the 'great united front movement'.

Blyth News, 12/11/36, p4

⁵⁰ *Blyth News*, 20/8/36, p1 and 24/8/36, p4

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17/12/36, p1

Unsurprisingly John Mordue provided 'strong opposition' to CP affiliation at a Morpeth DLP meeting.

North Mail, 18/9/36, p3

⁵² Thus Stevenson and Cook's claim that Blyth Council 'for a few years, had four Communist representatives' was not strictly true. Nor was the claim that the Communists in Blyth first stood as NUWM candidates before changing to a CP ticket in later years. In fact, a CP candidate was fielded in November 1931 in Croft ward. In 1932, there were no Communists. Instead, two NUWM candidates stood unsuccessfully in Croft ward. The following year the Communist label was successfully resumed as Breadin took a Labour seat in Croft ward. *Blyth News*, 5/11/31, p2; 3/11/32, p5 and 2/11/33, p5 and J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *Britain in the Depression. Society and Politics, 1929-1939* (Longman, Harlow, 2nd. edition, 1994) p152

⁵³ The general weakness of the labour movement in Tynemouth is revealed by the fact that the General Strike was weak there, which made it exceptional on Tyneside. The weakness of the Labour Party in Tynemouth is suggested by the fact that Dr S. Segal, its PPC in 1935, was from London. Segal's successor in January 1938 was J.A. Mason, a West Sussex councillor. There seemed to be no quality candidate from within Tynemouth DLP itself.

J.F. Clarke, op cit., p4 and *North Mail*, 6/1/38, p6

The fact that in 1935 Tynemouth TC provided only 'moral support' to Labour but did not 'for financial reasons, participate in political activities', did not help matters.

period.⁵⁴ Yet Tynemouth CP also failed to build a united front around the Hunger March and campaign against the Means Test. In late September Tynemouth CP attempted to stimulate united front activity with Labour by proposing a 'joint policy which expresses the views and aspirations of the great mass of the people in North Shields'.⁵⁵ A five point programme of united front activity was suggested. The first two points called for Labour to support the North Shields Hunger March contingent and requested that they help to organise a local unemployed demonstration planned for October. Tynemouth Labour Party's initial reaction to this appeal was to do nothing and it is unclear whether it subsequently acted upon any of the Communist proposals. There is no indication that Tynemouth Labour supported the Hunger March. The October demonstration went ahead when 250 marched under a banner reading 'Unity Against Hunger' on the local UAB office. It is conceivable that Tynemouth Labour Party helped organise the demonstration, but the only person reported as speaking was Michael Harrison, a local Communist, and two of the three in the deputation to the UAB offices were also Communists. If Labour Party members had been present, they did not play a prominent role in proceedings and the march was reported as being Communist-organised. In addition, only one of the three Labour councillors signed the appeal supporting the march. Though Labour was largely significant by its absence, four other signatories of the appeal were Moderate councillors.⁵⁶ This march could have represented some kind of Labour-less popular front. One of the councillors, Stanley Holmes, certainly supported other left activities at this time (such as a TJPC meeting mentioned below). Unfortunately, there is insufficient evidence about the terms on which support for the march was obtained to confirm whether it can accurately be perceived as a popular front. What can be said is that North Shields CP, prioritising domestic issues, made all the attempts to build a united front in the locality in autumn 1936 and Labour was, at best, reluctant to become involved and, at worst, hostile.⁵⁷ A significant indication of the general lack of north east official labour movement support for the Hunger March was the

B.A. Chater letter to TUC, 19/1/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/16)

⁵⁴ In 1932, Communist M.W. Harrison beat Labour into third place in Central ward but was still far from winning the seat. In 1933 and 1934 the CP again fielded four candidates (two stood under the NUWM label in 1933 and one in 1934). In 1934 Labour had only two candidates and Harrison, again in Central ward, came within 12 votes of taking the seat. In 1935, both Communists lost in straight fights against Moderates.

North Mail, 2/11/32, p9; 2/11/33, p9; *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/34, p6 and 2/11/35, p4

⁵⁵ The third point related to Spain (see below). Points four and five were calls for Labour to help provide more playing fields for working class children and alternative accommodation for old people living in slum areas.

Shields News, 25/9/36, p1

⁵⁶ As noted in footnote 38, Moderate with an 'M' could mean either Conservative or Liberal.

⁵⁷ *Shields News*, 2/10/36, p5 and 12/10/36, p1

P. Ovington of Tynemouth TC and chairperson of the NEFTC in 1936 was probably anti-Communist (see below).

fact that the area organiser of the Economic League could only cite national Labour figures who supported the march in London.⁵⁸

In contrast to the North Shields anti-Means Test march, the Jarrow March was far more clear cut. The Jarrow March began on 6 October with the Labour and Conservative agents for Jarrow jointly organising the accommodation en route. The Northern Liberal Federation also actively supported the Jarrow petition that accompanied the marchers. Yet this all-party support did not indicate a type of popular front. Though occurring simultaneously, the NUWM Hunger March and the Jarrow March were very different. The Hunger March was unashamedly 'political', blaming the government for unemployment. In contrast, the fundamental defining feature of the Jarrow March was its 'non-political' nature. This was made clear from the outset and was consistently stressed throughout the march. In September 1936, at a cross-party conference on Jarrow and the proposed march, Tom Magnay (Liberal National MP, Gateshead) and the Labour mayor of Jarrow agreed on the need to keep 'politics' out of the discussion. Ellen Wilkinson also stressed that no one would make political capital out of the march. D.F. Riley, the Labour councillor who conceived the idea, was so keen to distinguish it from the 'political' Hunger March that he proclaimed that it 'was not a hunger march, but a crusade'.⁵⁹ This conference set the tone for what followed. Almost every newspaper report of the march stressed its 'non-political' nature. Care was even taken to choose 'neutral' colours for marchers' banners.⁶⁰

Given the steadfast non-political stance of the Jarrow March, it cannot be seen as an example of the united or popular front in action. Part of the success of the non-political label was that the march was able to draw support from Conservatives, which was, of course, the desired outcome.⁶¹ The government was asked to do something for Jarrow, but was not blamed directly for the situation the town was in, nor was the efficacy of the capitalist system itself questioned. The march was primarily a charity event that anyone with a social conscience could subscribe to, regardless of their political affiliations or their understanding of the economic situation or economics in general. This is important as the same arguments apply to most of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, and this has serious ramifications for the popular front in Britain (see chapter eight).

⁵⁸ *Blaydon Courier*, 14/11/36, p4

⁵⁹ *Newcastle Journal*, 17/9/36, p9

⁶⁰ *Durham County Advertiser*, 16/10/36, p3; *Newcastle Journal*, 22/9/36, p9; 5/10/36, p9; 6/10/36, p9; 14/10/36, p9; 19/10/36, p14; 31/10/36, p16; 2/11/36, p5; 4/11/36, p2; E. Wilkinson, *The Town That Was Murdered* (Left Book Club, Gollancz, 1939) pp202-210; B.D. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson, 1891-1947* (Croom Helm, 1982) pp141-146 and R. Croucher, op cit., pp179-182

⁶¹ Wal Hannington, leader of the NUWM, argued that the Jarrow March should not be 'non-political'.

From the evidence, there was only one local anti-Means Test organisation that emerged in autumn 1936 and which may have been a united or popular front. Sixteen organisations met at Hetton lodge in mid-October to form a committee to work for the abolition of the Means Test. Thirteen of these organisations were represented on the committee which drafted two resolutions against the Means Test two weeks later. The 'Hetton and District Anti-Means Test Committee' held several protests during the following month. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine whether this was a united or popular front organisation as the newspaper reports gave no idea of which organisations were involved (including the three that withdrew). Furthermore, the meetings that the committee organised seem to have been addressed separately either by Labour Party members or Communists, suggesting that the members of the two parties did not share joint platforms on the issue.⁶² The Hetton Anti-Means Test Committee was also the only organisation of its type referred to in the regional press. As Hetton lodge agitated for the DMA to support the Hunger March, it is not surprising that it was also the centre of more localised united front efforts. Again, this seems an isolated and exceptional initiative that did not characterise a large section of opinion within the north east labour movement.

In December 1936 the DMA provided another indication of its reluctance to move from *theoretical* support of the united front to *practical* involvement in united front activity. Boldon lodge proposed a resolution on the need for a conference of working class bodies, both political and religious, to establish 'Unity Committees' to campaign against the UAB scales. The resolution was ruled out of order. Yet in March 1937 an almost identical Boldon resolution was carried in DMA council. The only real difference between the two resolutions was that the first specifically mentioned 'Unity Committees' (and thus implicit co-operation with Communists) whilst the second did not.⁶³ The DMA's official sanction of united front activity with Communists stretched to inviting them to one set of demonstrations in mid-August 1936. After that, the DMA eschewed Communist attempts at securing their support on domestic campaigns. Moreover, the DMA was not alone: though Durham DLP also supported Communist affiliation, it was not obviously represented at any united front activity in 1936. In short, campaigns around the Means Test and unemployment produced significant united front activity only in the Blaydon area. Elsewhere, they drew very little support and provoked more division amongst the left than unity.

Daily Worker, 3/11/36, p4

⁶² *Sunderland Echo*, 2/11/36, p7; *North Mail*, 9/11/36, p5; *Durham Chronicle*, 13/11/36, p5 and 27/11/36, p13

Peace Councils

There was no anti-BUF united front activity in the north east in 1936 as the BUF had largely been eradicated from the region by 1935.⁶⁴ In late 1935 and 1936 the emphasis switched to fascism abroad, with Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia in autumn 1935 and Hitler's re-militarisation of the Rhineland in spring 1936. Like the internal fascist threat before it, this growing external fascist threat provided potential issues for united and popular front agitation. The CP encouraged the 'Hands off Abyssinia' campaign in October 1935 which led to the formation of local peace councils.⁶⁵ The CP's polit bureau instructed its branches to secure representation on peace councils in order to develop mass anti-war activity. Murphy claimed that involvement in peace councils was the second plank (along with the campaign to affiliate to Labour) in the CP's initial popular front strategy.⁶⁶ Harry Pollitt revealed that there were 29 peace councils in Britain in 1935 and 130 by August 1937. The strongest centres were London (with 55) and Lancashire. South Wales and Yorkshire were the weakest areas.⁶⁷ There were at least two peace councils in the north east: Tyneside Joint Peace Council (TJPC) and Sunderland and District Peace Council (SDPC). Despite the involvement of some pacifists, both of these can be accurately characterised as popular front organisations.

Firstly, the popular front was suggested by the political diversity of the main TJPC organisers. The TJPC chairperson was Henry Bolton. Tom Aisbitt, the crypto-Communist chairperson of Newcastle TC, attempted to secure NEFTC funding for the organisation (see below). By June 1937, the Communist Nell Badsey was one of the TJPC secretaries. Others, such as R.G. Purcell who was TJPC secretary in 1936, seemed more liberal. As well as being chairperson of Newcastle NUGMW branch, he was secretary of Newcastle branch of the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction (CAPR) by December 1938.⁶⁸ The CAPR was established by Lloyd George in summer 1935 to promote his 'new deal' proposals to tackle unemployment and promote peace. Although professing to be 'non-party', the CAPR was

⁶³ DMA Ascertainments, Return Sheets, etc., 5/12/36 and 13/3/37 (DRO, D/DMA/129 and /130)

⁶⁴ N. Todd, op cit., pp78-84

⁶⁵ K. Laybourn & D. Murphy, op cit., p90

⁶⁶ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p247

⁶⁷ CP Central Committee Meeting Minutes, 6/8/37, Reel No.4 (MLHA)

The precise figures vary. Laybourn and Murphy put the figure at 25 in 1935 (13 of which were in London) and 175 in 1936 (55 of which were in London).

K. Laybourn & D. Murphy, op cit., p90

⁶⁸ It is uncertain when Purcell had joined the CAPR. Perhaps he joined it after contact with other CAPR members in TJPC work. His name appeared with Freda Bacon of the CAPR in a letter supporting the boycott of a Japanese ship by dockers in January 1938. Badsey appears to have been a secretary in addition to Purcell. *North Mail*, 6/8/36, p6; 10/10/36, p7; 11/6/37, p8; *Sunday Sun*, 23/1/38, p5 and *Shields Gazette*, 17/12/38, p1

designed to concert efforts to secure a parliament pledged to a progressive policy based on the proposals.⁶⁹

Some TJPC meetings also suggested the popular front; for example, a 'Peace rally' in Marsden Miners Hall in November 1936. Labour movement figures played a key role in the proceedings, with the Labour left represented by South Shields councillor Will Pearson and the omnipresent Jim Stephenson (Blaydon DLP). Nell Badsey also spoke and councillor Holmes (a Moderate in Tynemouth) and a clergyman were also present. Although a Moderate, Holmes supported other ostensibly left causes such as the Communist-organised anti-Means Test march in North Shields in mid-October 1936 (mentioned above). The TJPC meeting was definitely not based on a woolly and unfocused call for peace, as the resolution it passed protested against the government's support of fascist intervention in Spain and its expenditure on arms. It also demanded the restoration of the Spanish Republic's right to buy arms. Presumably Holmes agreed with this, in which case he was one of a very small number to the right of Labour who was prepared to support left causes on left platforms.⁷⁰ The involvement of the CAPR with the TJPC, for example, in organising a showing of *All Quiet on the Western Front* for Armistice day 1936, also suggests the popular front.⁷¹ However, some other TJPC meetings were more united front in character, with no obvious Liberal or 'non-party' individuals involved.⁷²

The SDPC was also a popular front organisation. The chairperson was a clergyman, Rev. William Beer, and the Labour mayor of Sunderland, alderman Thomas Summerbell, was a prominent member. Communists do not seem to have been as obvious as in the TJPC. Conceivably, the SDPC secretary, Alan Flanders, was a CP supporter, though unfortunately his politics remain obscure. Important local Labour left figures such as Sam Watson and Ellen Wilkinson spoke at SDPC meetings on the Spanish civil war in September and October 1936.⁷³ The SDPC 'Peace Week' in November 1936, which included meetings and the opening of a 'peace shop', embodied the popular front. CAPR members spoke alongside Labour representatives at 'Peace Week' meetings and the CAPR ran an exhibition in the 'peace

⁶⁹ P. Rowland, *Lloyd George* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1975) pp713-723; F. Owen, *Tempestuous Journey. Lloyd George His Life and Times* (Hutchinson, 1954) pp726-745 and R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975) pp111, 225 and 267

⁷⁰ *Shields News*, 16/11/36, p3; *Shields Gazette*, 14/11/36, p4 and 16/11/36, p2

⁷¹ *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 13/11/36, p3

As the film was shown in Newcastle, I am assuming that the 'Peace Council' involved was the TJPC and not the SDPC. This is an example of how imprecise newspaper reports can cause problems for the historian.

⁷² *Daily Worker*, 3/8/36, p5; *Evening Chronicle*, 4/8/36, p9; 7/12/36, p5; *Sunday Sun*, 2/8/36, p11; *Newcastle Journal*, 21/9/36, p14; *Shields Gazette*, 7/12/36, p3 and *North Mail*, 7/12/36, p10

⁷³ *Sunderland Echo*, 14/9/36, p6; 13/10/36, p4; *Newcastle Journal*, 14/9/36, p3; *Durham Chronicle*, 16/10/36, p4 and *North Mail*, 13/10/36, p7

shop'.⁷⁴ Peace councils elsewhere in Britain were also composed of large numbers of organisations. Battersea Peace Council, established in September 1936 to raise awareness of the danger of war, had trade unions, Labour Parties, churches, the CP, YCL and 'Greenshirts' (Social Credit Party) affiliated to it.⁷⁵ The Birmingham Council for Peace and Liberty (BCPL) was established in 1935 to fight fascism. It had Labour, CP and ILP representatives on it but was dominated by professional people.⁷⁶ In the north east, the peace councils represented popular fronts without overtly advocating the idea. This contrasted with Leeds anti-war committee, which the CP used as a vehicle for popular front propaganda.⁷⁷

There seems to have been more pacifism in the SDPC than in its Tyneside equivalent. The 'Peace Week' was intended to promulgate peace propaganda at the time of the Armistice commemorations. The 'peace shop' sold white poppies (and was physically attacked by an outraged opponent).⁷⁸ Some of the most important SDPC members were pacifists. Mayor Summerbell caused some consternation when he wore both white and red poppies on Remembrance Sunday, 1936.⁷⁹ Alan Flanders and other Labour councillors also wore white and red poppies, possibly indicating their pacifism.⁸⁰ Pacifism was also prominent in the messages of some of the speakers at the November 1936 SDPC peace meeting.⁸¹

Although pacifism was a stronger force in the SDPC, it appears not to have been the *dominant* one (though in practice it is very difficult to determine what demonstrates a 'pacifist attitude'). Other speakers at 'Peace Week' meetings called for arms for Spain and Abyssinia, which does not suggest pacifism.⁸² The resolutions at a SDPC meeting on Spain in mid-September expressed alarm at the government's foreign policy, asserted that peace could not be assisted by rearmament but called on the government to end non-intervention in Spain. A

⁷⁴ *Durham Chronicle*, 13/11/36, p5; *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 13/11/36, p3; *Sunderland Echo*, 16/11/36, p7; 28/9/36, p5 and *North Mail*, 16/11/36, p7

⁷⁵ The Greenshirts left in early 1937 but it retained 38 affiliates.

M. Squires, *The Aid to Spain Movement in Battersea, 1936-1939* (Elmfield Publications, 1994) p26

⁷⁶ P.D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's Response to the Spanish Civil War With Particular Reference to the Labour Movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, Birmingham University (1977) pp253-4

⁷⁷ D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, p232

⁷⁸ *Sunderland Echo*, 28/9/36, p5; 13/10/36, p4; *North Mail*, 13/10/36, p7 and *Evening Chronicle*, 11/11/36, p10

⁷⁹ There was controversy in September 1936 when *HMS Cairo* visited Sunderland. As mayor, Summerbell said he was prepared to receive officers from the ship but refused, due to his pacifist principles, to return the visit on board. He asked the ex-mayor to visit in his stead.

Sunderland Echo, 7/10/36, p5; *Newcastle Journal*, 4/9/36, p11 and 10/9/36, p9

⁸⁰ Of course, the wearing of a white poppy does not necessarily indicate a pacifist.

Evening Chronicle, 11/11/36, p10

⁸¹ *Durham Chronicle*, 13/11/36, p5

⁸² *Sunderland Echo*, 16/11/36, p7

month later, another SDPC meeting had a similar message.⁸³ This was not a purist pacifist stance and contrasted with Battersea Peace Council which, whilst helping raise awareness, was not directly involved with 'Aid Spain' activities.⁸⁴ It did not condemn foreign aggression in Spain till May 1937 and was, due to pacifists, reluctant to advocate arms for Spain. It was not until April 1938 that it supported the Republic's right to buy arms.⁸⁵ Unlike Battersea Peace Council but similar to those in the north east, the BCPL was vital in the campaign in support of Republican Spain. Due to a loss of morale in the Birmingham labour movement after the 1936 Labour conference the BCPL did most of the early campaigning on Spain.⁸⁶

Had pacifism been the *dominant* force in the SDPC, this would have had implications for the extent to which it could be seen as a popular front body. Fundamental to the popular front project was the need to supply the Spanish Republic with arms and to make a stand, with arms if necessary, against international fascism. A dominance of pacifism in the SDPC would have placed in doubt the claim that it was a type of popular front, as the unifying factor in the organisation would have been a rejection of war in all its forms, a moral stance rather than a recognition of the need to resist fascism, with arms if necessary, a political stance.⁸⁷ In practice, the SDPC brought together enough people from different political parties and groupings (and those who were not obviously aligned) who shared broadly the same feelings about the need to get rid of the government and oppose fascist states, with arms if necessary, to allow the SDPC to be depicted as a kind of popular front in the same way as the TJPC.

The very existence of the peace councils was something of a victory for the popular front. They allowed Communists to organise with official labour movement figures and also brought in some Liberals in the form of the CAPR. Their significance should not be overstated,

⁸³ *Newcastle Journal*, 14/9/36, p3; *Sunderland Echo*, 14/9/36, p6; 13/10/36, p4; *Durham Chronicle*, 16/10/36, p4 and *North Mail*, 13/10/36, p7

⁸⁴ It should be recognised that even self-proclaimed pacifists called for arms to Spain at this time. The picture is complicated by the fact that the left was in a period of transition, forced to reconsider its general rejection of all wars in the light of what was occurring in Spain, where they perceived a democratically elected government (or a revolution in some cases) defending itself from an attempted military coup. Ellen Wilkinson was still a member of the pacifist Peace Pledge Union (PPU) in September 1936, although she was thinking of resigning from the organisation, probably due to the war in Spain. Fenner Brockway of the ILP was another left winger who moved away from pacifism due to Spain. However, the evidence is insufficient to determine whether there was a general move away from pacifism in the north east after 1936.

Newcastle Journal, 9/9/36, p10 and F. Brockway, *Inside the Left. Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament* (George Allen & Unwin, 1942) p338

⁸⁵ M. Squires, op cit., pp26-28

⁸⁶ P.D. Drake, op cit., pp109-110 and 168

⁸⁷ Ceadel differentiated, as A.J.P. Taylor had, between pacifism and *pacifism*. Pacifism was a belief that war was always wrong, whereas *pacifism* desired the avoidance of war but accepted that it was occasionally necessary. Pacifism was not primarily a political idea but a moral creed. Conversely, *pacifism* was essentially political as it desired political reforms to achieve its ends rather than waiting for profound changes in human consciousness.

M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945: the Defining of a Faith* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980) pp3-5

however. It is unclear whether any Communist actually spoke at a TJPC meeting *as a Communist*. For example, at the TJPC 'Peace rally' in November 1936, Nell Badsey spoke, not as a Communist, but as a representative of North Shields Women's Co-Operative Guild.⁸⁸ The CP, moreover, does not seem to have played any obvious part in the SDPC.

Some TJPC meetings did secure relatively impressive support, some of which came from the official labour movement. Most notable was a meeting to elect representatives to the international peace congress in Brussels in early August at which there were 90 delegates representing 70 official and unofficial labour movement organisations.⁸⁹ As will be seen in chapter four, this turnout compares favourably with the support received by Unity Campaign meetings in the region. However, perhaps an event as ostensibly benign and worthy as an international peace congress could be expected to draw widespread labour movement support. But even support of such an apparently innocuous event caused some problems for the TJPC. A report on the congress in the *Gateshead Labour Herald* noted that 'several of our local people' thought it was a 'Communist off-shoot and seem to have no scruples about saying so'.⁹⁰ Indeed, the national Labour Party refused to participate as there was one foreign Communist involved.⁹¹

It is not clear precisely which official organisations were represented at this meeting and other evidence suggests that official labour movement support for the TJPC was, in fact, distinctly limited. In spring 1936, Aisbitt failed to secure NEFTC support for the TJPC. The NEFTC initially agreed to be represented at any inaugural conference of the TJPC (which was a 'provisional' body before this time).⁹² Yet it soon became clear that the NEFTC was sensitive to the possibility that the TJPC could be used to promote united front activity. At the following NEFTC meeting, discussion ensued around the possibility of proscribed organisations, such as the CP, taking part in the TJPC. It was agreed that the NEFTC would only be represented at an inaugural conference if it had been ascertained beforehand that proscribed organisations

⁸⁸ *Shields News*, 16/11/36, p3; *Shields Gazette*, 14/11/36, p4 and 16/11/36, p2

⁸⁹ The precise organisations represented are unknown.

Daily Worker, 3/8/36, p5; *Evening Chronicle*, 4/8/36, p9 and *Sunday Sun*, 2/8/36, p11

Other peace councils did the same. Bradford Peace Council, for example, sent representatives to Brussels, including one Communist.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., p237

⁹⁰ The writer of the report argued that this was 'a most dangerous misrepresentation' as there was only one Communist on the executive committee of twenty and that Sylvia Pankhurst supported it. Yet there does not appear to have been any obvious opposition to the fact that the TJPC itself sent a Communist delegate, perhaps because the delegate was not explicitly billed as a CP member.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 9/36, p7

⁹¹ J. Swift, op cit., p269

⁹² A Provisional Joint Peace Council (Tyneside Area) existed in October 1935. Jarrow Council Minutes, 19/10/35, p32 (SSPL)

were not involved.⁹³ Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine what occurred as there are no NEFTC minutes after June 1936 in the TUC archive. As Communists were involved, presumably the TJPC did not receive official NEFTC support. Continuing NEFTC determination to avoid the possibility of participating in united front activity on 'peace' issues was revealed at its annual meeting in June 1936. Blyth TC submitted a resolution which noted that the Federation viewed the trends in Europe 'with alarm' and proposed to circularise all affiliated and 'working class organisations' requesting 'most strenuous opposition' to all war and, in the event of war, to press the TUC to request that all affiliated organisations strike.⁹⁴ The chairperson, P. Ovington (Tynemouth TC) ruled the resolution out of order as long as Blyth persisted in including the words 'and working class organisations' [i.e. Communists].⁹⁵ The Blyth delegates withdrew the offending words and the resolution was unanimously passed.

Labour Party support was also limited. Most of the main official labour movement figures involved in the peace councils (Watson, Bolton, Stephenson, *et al*), were those on the left of the party and largely the same people who were involved in most areas of united and popular front activity in 1936. Participation of those to the right of Labour was also very limited. Apart from Holmes, everyone else involved with the TJPC was from the CAPR, a small and distinctly unorthodox group of Liberals. However, both north east peace councils compared favourably to the BCPL. Drake argued that its influence was weak as it was too dependent on CP support and its most active members were professional academics with no links to the labour movement. Trade unionists co-operated in its activity but there was only one regular trade unionist attendee. Though the BCPL was, along with the Left Book Club, at the forefront of popular front activities in Birmingham, it curiously had no connection with, and little sympathy for, Liberals.⁹⁶

The Spanish Civil War

As well as providing an issue on which existing peace councils could agitate, the war in Spain, which broke out in July 1936, stimulated other forms of united and popular front activity in the north east as elsewhere. The conflict in Spain certainly united representatives of different left parties on the same platform. A few days after the mid-August anti-Means Test demonstrations, which passed a supplementary resolution on the conflict, 3,000 attended a

⁹³ Ted Colgan (Blaydon & Dunston TC) moved the resolution regarding involvement with proscribed organisations. As a Catholic, he was a predictable anti-Communist (see chapter three). NEFTC Minutes, 8/2/36 and 28/3/36 (WMRC, 292/78/44)

⁹⁴ This resolution must have given Communists in Blyth hope that the official movement was coming round to supporting the united front. As argued above though, it was not.

⁹⁵ Ovington seconded Colgan's anti-Communist resolution in the NEFTC meeting in March 1936. NEFTC AGM Minutes, 13/6/36 (WMRC, 292/78/44)

meeting on Spain in Newcastle.⁹⁷ The speeches were delivered by several Labour Party members and a Communist chaired. The Progressive lord mayor of Newcastle sent a letter of support.⁹⁸ A conference on Spain a month later was a more complete united front as it also included the ILP. Ninety five delegates from 71 organisations including the Labour Party, Socialist League, CP, ILP, DMA, NMA, other trades unions and Co-operative Guilds were present and Communists and Labour Party members addressed the meeting.⁹⁹ The developments in Newcastle appear to have been initiated by the CP. George Aitken, a north east Communist leader, told the CP Central Committee that the party had approached 'influential people' in the north east labour movement and that many were 'only too anxious to take the platform alongside of us' on Spain.¹⁰⁰ This contrasted with Bradford, where the official movement asked the CP to send a speaker to their fund-raising effort for Spain, which, Murphy argued, reflected the important role the CP played in the 'Aid-for-Spain movement'.¹⁰¹ Moreover, many of these influential people in Newcastle were easily identifiable left wingers who were involved in other kinds of united front activity in 1936.

The second Newcastle Spain conference produced the first Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC) in the north east (Newcastle). A further three, North Shields, Gateshead and Blaydon, were established before the Unity Campaign began on 24 January, 1937. Of these, Gateshead SMAC was a wholly labour movement affair. Newcastle and North Shields SMACs appeared to be popular fronts. Yet, though differing in political complexion, all three committees had one other vital thing in common: they all depicted the conflict in Spain almost exclusively in humanitarian terms.¹⁰² This is crucial to our understanding of their political significance and impact and is discussed at length in chapter eight. Only one, Blaydon SMAC,

⁹⁶ P.D. Drake, *op cit.*, pp253-4

⁹⁷ The resolution, passed before the national labour movement decided to support non-intervention, called for the right of the Republic to buy arms. In South Wales, too, domestic struggles were linked with Spain.

H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1984) p108

⁹⁸ *Daily Worker*, 18/8/36, p5

⁹⁹ The attendance figures were almost identical to those of the TJPC organised meeting to choose delegates for the International Peace Congress in Brussels (see above). Unfortunately, we do not know whether these were largely the same organisations and people involved in both events. There is also some uncertainty about whose auspices the conference was organised under. It may have been the CP, TJPC or jointly organised.

DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 31/8/36 (DMOR), *Newcastle Journal*, 14/9/36, p14; *Daily Worker*, 15/9/36, p3 and *New Leader*, 18/9/36, p4

¹⁰⁰ CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

The August Spain meeting in Newcastle was only reported in the *Daily Worker* (18/8/36, p5) and was chaired by a Communist which tends to corroborate Aitken's claim.

¹⁰¹ D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, p242

¹⁰² *North Mail*, 29/9/36, p6; 2/11/36, p11; 18/1/37, p7; 24/3/37, p1; 5/5/37, p5; 2/6/37, p4; 22/7/37, p6; 25/4/38, p7; *Newcastle Journal*, 29/9/36, p4; 18/1/37, p7; *Shields News*, 13/10/36, p2; 24/10/36, p3; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/36, p4; 1/37, p6; 2/37, p1; *Sunday Sun*, 11/7/37, p3 and *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 16/7/37, p2

which was established in mid-January 1937, appeared to be a united front.¹⁰³ Though its three main officials were Labour Party members, a Communist, Wilf Jobling, actually 'took the initiative' in forming it.¹⁰⁴ In addition, it framed its campaign in political terms; as the 'struggle of Spanish democracy against Fascist intervention'.¹⁰⁵ Blaydon SMAC did not represent a new departure for the left in Blaydon as united front activity on Spain preceded its establishment by four months. In early September 1936, Blaydon CP held a 'Spain Solidarity meeting' with an eyewitness speaker. George Aitken spoke along with Steve Lawther of Blaydon DLP. After the meeting, a member of the audience expressed surprise at Lawther appearing to be a mouthpiece for Pollitt.¹⁰⁶ Unapologetic, Lawther responded that he thought Pollitt 'one of the ablest working class leaders in Britain today'.¹⁰⁷ Jobling chaired that meeting and Lawther later became secretary of Blaydon SMAC. Of a large and militant Chopwell family, Steve Lawther had a left wing reputation.¹⁰⁸ With Labour left wingers in control of Blaydon Labour Party, Spain merely provided another issue on which the CP and Labour could share platforms. Outside of Newcastle (in fact Newcastle TC and a handful of Labour left wingers), only Blaydon saw united front activity over Spain in the months before the Unity Campaign.

The conflict in Spain only brought very limited gains for the united front in Gateshead before the Unity Campaign. The fact that Gateshead SMAC was a wholly official affair which contrasted strongly with its Newcastle counterpart exemplified the lack of united front activity on Spain in Gateshead. However, one positive development was that Gateshead ILP, motivated by the situation in Spain, was at the forefront of advancing working class unity in autumn 1936. As well as calling for the September conference on Spain held in Newcastle, the branch sought further united working class action by calling an 'open forum' with Labour, Co-operative Party and CP representatives to discuss unity.¹⁰⁹ This development was significant as Gateshead ILP, and especially Mark Simpson (who was also ILP North East Divisional

¹⁰³ The united front SMACs are discussed at greater length together in chapter four.

¹⁰⁴ Wilf Jobling Memorial Leaflet produced by Blaydon SMAC (MML, B4/M/2)

All three were also involved in the Blaydon Socialist Sunday School (see chapter two). Jobling was not a member of Blaydon SMAC for very long, as he left in January 1937 to fight in the International Brigade in Spain.

North Mail, 3/3/38, p9; *Blaydon Courier*, 16/1/37, p7; 6/2/37, p20; 17/4/37, p5; *Sunday Sun*, 21/5/39, p13 and *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 26/5/39, p3

¹⁰⁵ *Blaydon Courier*, 16/1/37, p7

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 5/9/36, p8; 12/9/36, p5 and p8

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 19/9/36, p5

¹⁰⁸ He had been imprisoned during 1926 and was very close to the CP politically.

See L.H. Mates, 'From Revolutionary to Reactionary: The Life of Will Lawther', M.A. Thesis, Newcastle University (1996) *passim*

¹⁰⁹ This was curious as the Co-operative Party was only a significant independent (but Labour aligned) electoral force in the Northumberland town of Ashington. Given this, the Co-operative Party does not feature prominently in this thesis.

secretary), had been opposed to co-operation with the CP from June 1933.¹¹⁰ It is not clear whether any understanding with the CP actually arose from this forum. The first and from the evidence, only, result of the forum was an understanding between the ILP and Gateshead Socialist League which resulted in a joint propaganda committee. The committee organised a series of joint meetings in December 1936.¹¹¹ As Gateshead ILP and Socialist League shared the same premises, Westfield Hall, this was arguably not a particularly important step on the path to working class unity.¹¹² Not only were the CP and ILP excluded from Gateshead SMAC, the practicalities of raising money for the Republic brought Gateshead ILP into conflict with Gateshead LP&TC. The ILP was annoyed by the Labour-controlled Watch Committee's refusal to permit a street collection on behalf of Spanish workers in October 1936.¹¹³ Yet at least the ILP was involved with the left in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns in these early months; this was to change in 1937.

In other localities, too, there was no joint activity between the left parties on Spain. The Labour Party, CP and NUWM in South Shields held meetings on Spain and these were never jointly organised.¹¹⁴ Point three of Tynemouth CP's programme for united front activity with the Labour Party suggested that Labour take part in joint activities with the CP 'in defence of our working class brothers and sisters in Spain [...]'.¹¹⁵ But, as with the other four points relating to domestic issues discussed above, there is no evidence that Tynemouth Labour acted. North Shields SMAC was aided by many diverse individuals and organisations but the Labour Party seems to have been absent.¹¹⁶ There is no evidence of united front activity on Spain in late 1936 in any other north east localities.

Municipal Elections

In the north east municipal elections of November 1936, there were no cases of Communists and Labour fielding people against candidates of the right in the same wards (and

New Leader, 18/9/36, p4

¹¹⁰ In fact Simpson chaired the North East Area Unity Campaign Committee in 1937 (see chapter four). ILP NAC Minutes, 24-25/6/33; 5,6 and 7/8/33; 22/9/34 and Resolutions for ILP National Conference, 1935 p10 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/4; COLLMISC702/8 and ILP/5/1935/18)

¹¹¹ The Gateshead Socialist League EC Minutes ended in July 1936, so there is no record of this.

¹¹² This co-operation between the Labour left and ILP was reflected in another north east locality. In December 1936 a Socialist League speaker addressed a Shildon ILP meeting on the situation in Spain.

New Leader, 11/12/36, p6

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 23/10/36, p4

¹¹⁴ The CP and NUWM meetings often had the same speakers who were, of course, invariably prominent local Communists.

Shields Gazette, 25/8/36, p2; 31/8/36, p5; 28/7/36, p5; 29/3/38, p8; 18/4/38, p3; 15/9/38, p3 and *North Mail*, 14/9/38, p5

¹¹⁵ This was another illustration, along with the DMA demonstration of August 1936, of how both foreign and domestic issues could be used to advocate united front activity.

Shields News, 25/9/36, p1

consequently competing for the left vote). However, there was equally no positive united front activity around the elections, despite Communist efforts. These efforts were not entirely new. In 1935 the CP in the north east had only fielded candidates in its two north east strongholds, Tynemouth and Blyth.¹¹⁷ At Tynemouth, both Communists lost in straight contests against Moderates, so the 'working class vote' (i.e. left vote) was not split. Two Communists stood in Croft ward in Blyth against Labour and Moderate opposition but were defeated. Though the Communist united front electoral policy was not followed, the CP had proposed a joint campaign in Croft ward but Blyth Labour Party rejected this.¹¹⁸ Similar to 1935, there were Communist candidates only at Tynemouth, Blyth and Morpeth in 1936. Unfortunately for the CP, its attempts to stimulate a united front around the local elections by renewed efforts to reach electoral agreements with Labour were to prove as fruitless as the previous year.¹¹⁹

In Tynemouth the CP approached the Labour Party regarding co-operation in the 1936 municipal elections but there were no significant advances. In September 1936, the CP decided to field two candidates for Tynemouth council but not to contest Milbourn ward as Labour had a candidate there. (A letter informing Tynemouth Labour Party of this decision also proposed the five point plan, discussed above). As with all the other Communist proposals, the Labour Party did nothing. Undeterred, the CP again approached Labour with a view to co-operation after a Communist candidate was excluded from standing in the elections on the grounds of non-residency. The Communists asked Labour to field a candidate in Central ward and suggested Mrs E. Young who, they felt, had a better chance of winning the seat. The CP stipulated that Young should only stand if she undertook to follow a 'working class policy' and

¹¹⁶ North Shields was represented on Tynemouth council.

¹¹⁷ Noreen Branson claimed that a new Communist electoral policy commensurate with the change of line in 1933 to support for the united front began in time for the 1934 municipal elections. Yet Communists in the north east continued the policy of the previous year and stood candidates against Moderate and Labour candidates with no regard to the possibility of splitting the left vote. (In 1933 Communists stood against Labour and Moderate candidates at Gateshead, South Shields, North Shields and Blyth. In 1934 there were Communist candidates at Newcastle, South Shields, Sunderland, Tynemouth, Blyth, Jarrow and Morpeth municipalities and for Felling UDC, against, with two exceptions, Labour and Moderate opposition). This can be explained as perhaps confusion within local Communist branches regarding the strategy, which was evident elsewhere. For example, in Yorkshire Communist candidates standing against Labour in the municipal elections were withdrawn in Leeds but allowed to stand in Bradford. Where there were attempts to secure electoral alliances in November 1934, neither the ILP nor Labour were interested. *North Mail*, 2/11/33, p9; *Blyth News*, 2/11/33, p5; *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/34, p6; *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 13/4/34, p5; N. Branson, op cit., p145; K. Laybourn & D. Murphy, op cit., pp83 and 86 and D.L. Murphy, op cit., p432

¹¹⁸ *Blyth News*, 4/11/35, p5; 23/7/36, p1 and *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/35, p4

This unimpressive record in the north east contrasted strongly with London where Communist offers of electoral assistance were accepted by 57 of 62 constituencies in the County Council elections.

J. Callaghan, op cit., p166

¹¹⁹ In fact, the right seemed keener on an electoral 'united front' than the left did. The fact that Liberals and Conservatives were making renewed efforts to unite against the left threat had ramifications for the popular front (see chapter seven).

regularly to give an 'account of her stewardship' to the electorate.¹²⁰ If Labour accepted these proposals, the CP promised to support them. If not, they would field their own candidate. In the event, neither Labour nor the Communists fielded a candidate in Central ward and the Moderate was returned unopposed. Though there was no ward in which Labour and the CP fought each other for the left vote in Tynemouth, this was due to Labour's weakness and Communist keenness to avoid such a scenario.¹²¹

At Blyth, two Communist councillors stood for re-election against Labour Party candidates in November 1936. However, as there were no Moderates standing, there was no prospect of the right benefiting from a split left vote, although this was probably more by chance than anything else: it is likely Moderates decided that they had no chance of victory in what was a slum area.¹²² A similar observation can be made regarding Morpeth. There, a Communist and two Labour candidates stood in a four seat ward. Technically the left vote was not being split, though again this was probably due to the fact that Morpeth was very conservative and that none of the left candidates had a chance of getting elected.¹²³

The north east ILP made no attempt before 1935 to avoid splitting the left vote at local elections, possibly because branches enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in terms of election tactics and alliances.¹²⁴ Thus in the November 1934 elections there were ILP candidates at Gateshead and Sunderland, both standing against Labour and Moderate opposition (and both coming bottom of the poll).¹²⁵ In 1935 Allan Henderson came last in a Gateshead by-election against Labour and Ratepayer's candidates.¹²⁶ However, it appeared in 1935 that the ILP was at least concerned to avoid splitting the left vote *outside of the Labour Party*. A Gateshead ILP letter to the NAC complained about the 'unsatisfactory and changing attitude' of the local

¹²⁰ *Shields News*, 12/10/36, p3

¹²¹ The only Communist candidate, Gray, was beaten into third place in Dockwray ward by two Moderates. *Shields News*, 7/10/36, p1; 8/10/36, p3; *North Mail*, 24/10/36, p9; 3/11/36, p9 and *Evening Chronicle*, 3/11/36, p6

¹²² Both Communists were re-elected.

¹²³ When a by-election was called for the council in February 1939, the Communist candidate stood against Labour and Moderate candidates (see chapter four).

North Mail, 21/9/36, p7; 3/11/36, p1 and *Evening Chronicle*, 3/11/36, p6

¹²⁴ There were no north east ILP candidates in the 1933 elections.

The issue was discussed by the ILP NAC in June 1935 which concluded that as no decision had been arrived at branches were 'entitled to reach decisions best suited to the local circumstances, subject to any national decisions which may be reached subsequently'.

ILP NAC Minutes, 29 and 30/6/35 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/10)

¹²⁵ *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/34, p6; 2/11/35 p4 and *North Mail*, 2/11/33, p9

¹²⁶ ILP NAC Minutes, 28/6/35 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/10)

CP towards the ILP candidate in the 'recent' municipal elections, suggesting that a failed attempt had been made to secure Communist support for the ILP's candidate.¹²⁷

The ILP did not field candidates in either the November 1935 or 1936 municipal elections, possibly reflecting a new desire to avoid splitting the left vote. But a more likely explanation is that, with the failures of the 1934 local elections, the subsequent absence of ILP candidates was merely a reflection of the increasing weakness of the party in the north east. This view is reinforced by the behaviour of the ILP in Jarrow. There, in 1937, the ILP did not hesitate to field candidates against Labour, despite the presence of Moderates, where it was thought that the party had a strong following. There is no evidence that the ILP withdrew candidates from certain wards after reaching agreement with Labour, which suggests that the united front at the polls in the north east was far less developed in 1936 than in other parts of Britain.¹²⁸

In fact, the only evidence of concern about splitting the working class vote between the ILP and Labour Party before summer 1936 was expressed within a DLP. At the 1936 Wansbeck DLP annual meeting, Seaton Valley LLP submitted a resolution expressing disapproval of Labour and the ILP standing candidates against each other at the general election and calling on the NEC 'to arrive at a working arrangement with the ILP so that a clash of socialist candidates will be avoided and lead to a greater solidarity in the socialist vote'.¹²⁹ Even this concern did not stretch to a majority of the delegates however, as the resolution was defeated 27 votes to 36. It was also significant that the CP did not figure at all in these considerations. Thus, despite some Communist attempts, there was no united front activity around local elections in 1936.

Other Arenas: Trade Union Work and the Left Book Club

One event occurring a matter of three weeks before the Unity Campaign began ostensibly indicated that Communist attempts at building co-operation within trade unions were beginning to bear fruit and that the Unity Campaign was well timed to capitalise on these developments. In early January 1937, Michael Harrison, a Communist, was brought in by striking North Shields trawlermen and elected their leader after the TGWU refused to

¹²⁷ This probably refers to the Henderson by-election: the municipal elections were not 'recent' in July 1935 as they occurred every November.

ILP NAC Minutes, 10/7/35 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/10)

¹²⁸ There were agreements avoiding conflicting candidates with the Labour Party at Bristol, Norwich, Plymouth Hastings, Eastbourne, Chorley and other places. If there had been similar agreements with the CP, they were not mentioned in the secretary's report. In the 1936 elections the ILP fielded 50 candidates nationally. Twelve were elected with five gains and one loss. For details on Jarrow ILP see chapter two.

ILP NAC Minutes, 7 and 8/11/36 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/12)

¹²⁹ Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 21/3/36 (NRON, 527/A/3)

recognise the strike. Some strikers greeted the involvement of a Communist with hostility and a group refused to participate, claiming that the strike was started in an unconstitutional manner. Harrison's intervention did not bring success as the strike, begun on 4 January, ended in defeat nineteen days later.¹³⁰

Despite these problems and the strike's ultimate failure, this event indicated that Communists were, in times of strife, not necessarily seen by rank-and-file trade unionists as the pariahs that union leaders wished to depict them. However, this example was an isolated one, and it would therefore be mistaken to attach too much significance to it. Indeed, it only occurred at all because the official movement refused to support the strike. Furthermore, there is no indication that the prominent involvement of Communists in trade union struggles necessarily had any impact on *political* developments within the labour movement. Communist trade unionists themselves often avoided 'politics': reports of the CP districts to the leadership on their industrial activity revealed a tendency to by-pass political questions for day-to-day matters in industry.¹³¹ It is difficult to determine if Harrison gained any political benefits for himself or his party due to his leadership of this strike. He did not stand in any local elections afterwards and none of his comrades were elected to Tynemouth council. Likewise, there was no indication that Labour in the town was more inclined to participate in united front activity after January 1937 (see chapter four). Another example of Communist trade union involvement not bringing political rewards was given by Murphy. Though Bradford TC supported a resigned Communist delegate's visit to Russia in 1938, Murphy argued that this was a vote of confidence in the Communist *as a trade unionist* and indicated support for Soviet Russia, but *not for the CP itself*.¹³² The extensive involvement of Communists in various struggles and campaigns which did not pay dividends in political terms was a recurrent theme in this period, the most extreme examples of which can be observed in many of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns (see chapter eight).

Many local Left Book Club (LBC) groups, which emerged in the months after the Club was established by Victor Gollancz in March 1936, became popular fronts in microcosm in terms of the social and political diversity of their members.¹³³ The Comintern instructed the CP

¹³⁰ *North Mail*, 7/1/37, p5; *Newcastle Journal*, 7/1/37, p14; 23/1/37, p9; *Shields News*, 5/1/37, p1; 8/1/37, p1; 9/1/37, p3; 14/1/37, p4; 28/1/37, p4; 15/2/37, p8; 16/2/37, p1; 18/2/37, p1 and 19/2/37, p1

¹³¹ N. Redfern, op cit., p29

Redfern suggested what Nina Fishman called the CP's 'revolutionary pragmatism' was more appropriately deemed 'opportunism'. (p31)

¹³² D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp395-398

Brown made a similar point.

K.D. Brown, *The English Labour Movement, 1700-1951* (Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1982) p272

¹³³ F. Brockway, *The Workers Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) p244

to support the LBC as an effective basis for the popular front in Britain. The LBC became, Murphy asserted, the second part of a new two-fold Communist popular front strategy.¹³⁴ Between 1936 and 1939 several LBC groups were established throughout the north east.¹³⁵ By April 1939 LBC groups, the *Sunday Sun* could claim, were 'very active' in County Durham in forming discussion groups.¹³⁶ As early as November 1936, Aitken opined to the CP central committee that, regarding the 'people's front', the party needed to pay attention to LBC circles which 'can draw in many elements'.¹³⁷ On this level, the LBC in the north east probably brought Communists, Labour Party members, Liberals and non-aligned (including many middle class) people together, as it did elsewhere in Britain. In this sense then the LBC may have had an un-measurable political effect and provided some recruits to the CP as most of the books the group dealt with supported the Communist line to a greater or lesser extent.

It has also been argued that the LBC, as an organisation, was heavily involved in political campaigning as well. The *Sunday Sun* claimed that the LBC in the north east was very active in 'Aid Spain' activities.¹³⁸ Charlie Woods, a north east Communist, also asserted that the LBC, along with the CP, provided the 'driving force' of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns.¹³⁹ Of course, as the organisation was a book club, by definition it should not be expected to participate in political activity. However, if claims are made about the LBC operating as a political campaigning group, these should be tested. The evidence from the north east does not corroborate Wood's claim. The only positive evidence of LBC involvement in north east 'Aid Spain' campaigns before 1939 was Durham LBC group which established Durham SMAC.¹⁴⁰ The LBC was involved in the Tyneside foodship campaign of 1939 (which was well underway when the *Sunday Sun* made its comment), but the political impact of this campaign was

There were 1,200 LBC groups in Britain by April 1939.

S. Samuels, 'The Left Book Club', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.1, No.2 (1966) pp65, 67 and 72-3, 75

¹³⁴ The first part was involvement in the Unity Campaign, which would achieve CP affiliation to Labour.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., p294

Pimlott was thus mistaken in describing the LBC as a 'de facto united front'.

B. Pimlott, op cit., p93

¹³⁵ There was a LBC theatre guild group at Newcastle, and LBC groups at Ashington, Blyth, Monkseaton, Morpeth, Prudhoe and Whitley Bay in Northumberland; Blaydon, Felling, Newcastle and South Shields on Tyneside and Bishop Auckland, Durham, Fishburn, Seaham Harbour, Spennymoor, Stanley District and Sunderland in County Durham.

Left Book News, 8/36; 9/36; 11/36; 3/37; 4/37; 5/37; 12/38; 1/39; *North Mail*, 13/5/39, p6; 14/10/38, p5; 29/3/38, p6; *Shields Gazette*, 12/8/37, p10; 19/8/37, p2; *Evening Chronicle*, 10/12/36, p13; *Tribune*, 30/6/39, p8 and *Blaydon Courier*, 14/10/38, p1

¹³⁶ *Sunday Sun*, 9/4/39, p9

See also B. Reid, 'The Left Book Club in the Thirties', in J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies & C. Snee, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1979) pp197-8

¹³⁷ CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

¹³⁸ *Sunday Sun*, 9/4/39, p9

¹³⁹ Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrrh, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4/M/1)

¹⁴⁰ *Durham Chronicle*, 11/6/37, p8 and 30/7/37, p6

minimal (see chapter eight). A.J.P. Taylor contended that the LBC acted as a 'safety valve', as reading is 'a substitute for political action, not a prelude to it'.¹⁴¹ Though, with the exception of Durham, the LBC in the region was not obviously involved in most of the 'Aid Spain' campaigning before 1939, it did, like the LBC elsewhere in the country, participate in the popular front campaigns of 1938 and 1939 (see chapters five and six).¹⁴² Thus, as well as representing the popular front itself, the LBC contributed to the popular front campaigns. More generally, Taylor's remark implied that all written political propaganda was self-defeating, an obviously untenable position.

Due to its activity on Spain, Durham LBC group, which formed in early 1937, is the only north east group on which there is detailed (but not exhaustive) information. There was some social diversity in the group. Two members were middle class professionals: Richard J.S. Baker BA was resident sub-warden at Durham House Settlement and Fred Peart, also university educated, was a teacher and prominent Labour figure.¹⁴³ Sam Watson and John Lyall Robson, a DMA executive clerk and a Labour Durham City councillor from November 1938, represented the working class.¹⁴⁴ As a full membership list and details of the political affiliations of all Durham LBC members is unavailable, it cannot be determined whether the group represented the popular front in political terms, although Baker asserted that the group was open to those of 'all shades of opinion'.¹⁴⁵ The fact that Durham LBC group had several prominent miners involved in it perhaps offers some explanation of why it was exceptional in its practical involvement in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, as both miners' unions, and the DMA particularly, were strong financial supporters of the Republic. This is not to say that many others involved in the LBC were not also active in these campaigns. If they were, though, it was as Labour Party members, Communists etc., and not specifically as LBC members. Moreover, it is unclear how many people the LBC *actually introduced to left politics* rather than merely reflecting the politics they already had. Watson, for example, was a left winger before he became involved in the LBC (see below). The LBC did contribute to popular front activity, but this contribution was severely limited by the relatively small numbers involved in

¹⁴¹ A.J.P. Taylor, 'Confusion on the Left' in J. Raymond (ed.), *The Baldwin Age* (Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1960) p76

Similarly, Birmingham LBC groups (there were twelve in the city by June 1937) played little part in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns.

P.D. Drake, op cit., p274-6

¹⁴² The LBC produced leaflets on Munich and the Spanish civil war in late 1938 which, Jupp claimed, gave it more political significance as it surpassed anything the Labour Party had done between the Oxford and Bridgwater by-elections.

J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982) pp98 and 115

¹⁴³ *Durham Chronicle*, 11/6/37, p8

¹⁴⁴ DMA EC Minutes, 7/11/38 (DMOR)

groups. However large and popular the LBC was in a region, it still could not compete in terms of numbers and influence with a trade union, for instance. To succeed in a region like the north east, the united and popular fronts needed significant backing from within the main body of the official labour movement. These considerations temper the impression of the LBC as a dynamic and vital popular front force.¹⁴⁶

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In November 1936, George Aitken, north east district delegate to the CP's central committee, was very positive about recent developments in his region. Aitken asserted that the party had 'every reason to be optimistic' about the north east.¹⁴⁷ Whilst the region had been regarded as 'one of the most backward districts of the Party for many years' he thought that 'already we begin to see important events taking place and [...] that the workers in that backward area are moving towards unity [...] distinct strides have been made in the approach to these workers by our Party, and the extent to which they are prepared to associate with us'.¹⁴⁸ Aitken thought that it was significant that the DMA supported Communist affiliation to Labour by a unanimous vote and that the attempt to secure official DMA support for the Hunger March was defeated by only one vote on the DMA executive. He reported that Newcastle TC and a large number of other lodges, local Labour Parties and Co-operative sections had associated with the march and a large proportion of the marchers officially represented their unions. Aitken noted the 'same tendency' in the 'tremendous campaign' around Spain and in the peace movement, which had sent five delegates to the Brussels conference.¹⁴⁹

As argued above, the available evidence suggests that Aitken was depicting the situation in an unjustifiably positive light. Only a handful of DMA lodges (14 out of 170, or 8%, hardly a 'large number') actually supported the Hunger March.¹⁵⁰ The DMA did support CP affiliation to Labour, but the closest it came to putting this theoretical position into practice was inviting Communists to its anti-Means Test demonstrations in mid-August. After this time the DMA eschewed united front initiatives. Aitken's claim that the DMA executive was split

¹⁴⁵ *Durham Chronicle*, 30/7/37, p6

¹⁴⁶ James Jupp claimed that the LBC had great importance in spreading left ideas and undoubtedly helped Labour's election victory in 1945. Just how much it contributed to this victory though, Jupp, wisely, did not attempt to ascertain.

J. Jupp, op cit., p99

¹⁴⁷ CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁵⁰ The lodge vote of 153 in favour to 644 against equated to just over 19% support. This discrepancy can be explained as several of the lodges supporting the Hunger March were some of the largest in the DMA and consequently had more votes. Yet even 19% cannot be described as 'large' support.

by one vote over support for the march is impossible to verify (votes of the executive were not recorded in the minutes), but it is unlikely if the proportion of lodges actively supporting the Hunger March is taken as a basis for any executive vote. The only significant body Aitken mentioned by name as supporting the Hunger March was Newcastle TC, which figured heavily in almost all left wing activity of this period, so its involvement was hardly a coup. The TJPC conference to choose the Brussels peace congress delegates had drawn a relatively wide amount of labour movement support. Yet the elected delegates (two of whom were Bolton and Stephenson), and those most active in the TJPC generally, were the same Labour left figures who were involved in almost all of the united and popular front activity in the north east in 1936. The TJPC was merely another forum through which largely the same people could participate in united and popular front activity.

Perhaps compared to what had been occurring in the 'backward' north east before, 'tremendous strides' had been made and there was reason to feel positive, but there remained even greater barriers for the united and popular fronts to overcome in the region. Aitken was, perhaps, not in the best position to comment on the long term picture in the north east given that he had only been present in the district for a 'month or two'.¹⁵¹ As will be argued in chapter four, anti-Means Test activity declined after early 1937, suggesting that the united front was not, contrary to Aitken's claims, making strides in the region, at least on the domestic front. In fact, it would appear that the united front peaked in the north east in late 1936. Aitken was therefore commenting on the situation at its best, before things began to deteriorate in 1937 and after. Overall, united and popular front activity on domestic and foreign policy issues in 1936 was small scale and very limited in the north east. There is little indication that the united front was deemed important by significant numbers within the official north east labour movement in 1936: the lack of significant theoretical support for Communist affiliation to Labour in the north east was largely reflected in the lack of practical united and popular front activity in the region. The claims of the historians quoted at the outset regarding the extent to which grass roots united front co-operation occurred nationally are clearly not substantiated by the experience of the north east in 1936.

Why Was There So Little United and Popular Front Activity?

From the evidence, opposition to the united front only came from the official labour movement in 1936. No ILP or CP branches in the region seemed opposed to the united front in 1936. As has been seen, Gateshead ILP (previously opposed to the united front), and the CP in some localities, formulated several initiatives attempting to encourage united front activity.

There are several reasons why there was so little united and popular front activity in the north east in 1936 and these will now be discussed. Firstly, the left outside of the Labour Party was small in the region. Labour Party support in the north east had grown from Methodism, trade unions and co-operatives, with Labour building on Liberal foundations. The left outside of the Labour Party could not gain a foothold.¹⁵² The north east was not an ILP stronghold in the thirties. A north east ILP activist, Len Edmondson, said that the party was 'not excessively strong' in the region and this is borne out by other evidence.¹⁵³ If figures for affiliation fees corresponded to membership in individual divisions (membership figures themselves are scarce), then north east membership in 1929 was only 8% of total ILP membership.¹⁵⁴ Only the East Anglia and South West divisions had less members. Moreover, disaffiliation seems to have had a slightly larger impact on ILP membership in the north east than elsewhere as the region experienced a relative decline within the ILP. In July 1936, Division Two, with 262 members, only accounted for 7% of total ILP membership.¹⁵⁵ The youth organisation was no larger, as the division accounted for 6% of Guild of Youth groups in 1934.¹⁵⁶ The ILP was, as Len Edmondson said, 'electorally unsuccessful' in the north east.¹⁵⁷ As already seen, the party stood very few candidates in the region with no success between 1932-1936.

As well as having a negative quantitative impact on the ILP, disaffiliation from Labour also had a negative qualitative impact. John Paton later claimed that the effect of disaffiliation was to drive out 'every single member of local influence and weight'.¹⁵⁸ Most joined the Labour Party or CP.¹⁵⁹ This was probably the case for the north east. Certainly Division Two only seems to have produced one high ranking trade unionist after 1936, and that was Tom Stephenson of Cumberland who was ILP divisional council chairperson and north east

¹⁵¹ Ibid.,

¹⁵² J. Jupp, op cit., p178

¹⁵³ Len Edmondson Interview, 4/11/94

¹⁵⁴ The ILP's Division Two included Cumberland and Teesside as well as County Durham and Northumberland.

¹⁵⁵ This figure is reflected by the number of branches. In early 1934, Division Two had between 7% and 8% of the total number of branches.

ILP NAC Minutes, 4 & 5/7/36 and 1939 NAC financial report (for year ending in February) (BLPES, COLLMISC702/12 and ILP7/4/3)

¹⁵⁶ The ILP figures contradict each other. The dated NAC minutes put the figure at 23 branches but a Brockway report of the same period puts the figure at 27.

Undated report on the state of the party, NAC Minutes, January-May 1934 and NAC Minutes, 10 & 11/2/34 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/6 and ILP3/24)

¹⁵⁷ Len Edmondson Interview, 4/11/94

¹⁵⁸ For example, in August 1932 of the 44 ILP councillors in Glasgow, 40 left the ILP.

R.E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre. The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1940* (Longmans, 1966) p189

¹⁵⁹ Some disillusioned ILP members joined the BUF. Newcastle BUF branch was established by two ex-ILP members and other disaffected ILPers were recruited to it. John Beckett, an ILP MP for Gateshead in the twenties, also became a significant figure in fascist circles in the thirties.

N. Todd, op cit., pp11, 13, 23 and 36

representative on the ILP NAC.¹⁶⁰ He was also a member of Cumberland county council and, most significantly, he was financial secretary of the Cumberland Miners' Association from May 1937.¹⁶¹ On disaffiliation from Labour in 1932, Ruth Dodds of Gateshead left the ILP and established a Socialist League branch.¹⁶² Two other people who were important Labour left wingers in 1936 had left the ILP between 1932 and 1934. Jim Stephenson of Blaydon (presumably no relation to Tom Stephenson) was an important DMA activist and certainly a major loss for the ILP.¹⁶³ By 1936 the ILP had also lost Allan Henderson, a lawyer, to Gateshead Labour Party.¹⁶⁴

The CP, too, did not have a large membership in the north east. As noted above, Aitken used the adjective 'backward' several times to describe the north east in November 1936. Membership figures for the region in 1936 are not available. In August 1938, presumably after some years of growth, the CP north east district had 550 members.¹⁶⁵ Though larger numerically than the ILP in the region, proportionately the north east CP was weaker as it comprised less than 4% of the total CP membership.¹⁶⁶ The 155 members of the YCL in the north east in summer 1938 was just over 3% of the total YCL membership of 4,602.¹⁶⁷ In fact, north east CP membership in 1938 did not even compare favourably with that of a decade previously. In 1926, at the peak of its influence (due to its more militant stance on the coal strike) the CP had 1,900 members in the north east. Though membership quickly fell to less than 750 the following year, this was still almost half as much again as the mid-1938 figure.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁰ Presumably ILP members were active in their unions. Len Edmondson was certainly active in the AEU. Len Edmondson Interview, 4/11/94

¹⁶¹ *New Leader*, 4/12/36 p6, 26/2/37 p6 and 7/5/37 p6 and A.W. Purdue, 'The ILP in the North East of England', p38 in D. James, T. Jowitt & K. Laybourn (eds.), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party. A Collection of Essays* (Ryburn Academic, Krumlin, 1992)

¹⁶² Dodds provided the loan to buy Westfield Hall, edited the *Gateshead Labour Herald* and was a prominent member of the 'Progressive Players'.

A.W. Purdue, op cit., p38 and M. Callcott & M. Espinasse, 'Ruth Dodds (1890-1976)' in J. Bellamy & J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Vol. VII* (Macmillan, 1984) pp63-67

¹⁶³ Stephenson gave a lecture as an ILP member on the 'Results of the Great War' for the Newcastle Branch of the British Anti-War Movement in November 1934.

The Gun, 9/11/34, No.8 (TWAS, D/VA/67/1); A. Mason, op cit., p40 and N. Todd, op cit., p70

¹⁶⁴ As noted above, Henderson had stood as an ILP candidate in a Gateshead by-election in early summer 1935.

¹⁶⁵ *North Mail*, 29/8/38, p5

¹⁶⁶ CP Central Committee 15th Congress Report, 1938, p30, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p26

¹⁶⁸ J.F. Clarke & J.W. Leonard, *The General Strike 1926 Handbook* (Newcastle University School of Education, Archive Teaching Units No.7, Newcastle, 1971) p21

In contrast to Tyneside, the CP did not experience an ephemeral boost in membership on Teesside immediately after 1926.

A. Mason, 'The General Strike on Teesside', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.4 (1970) p18

This contrasted strongly with the fortunes of the CP nationally which, in 1936, surpassed its previous highest membership figure.¹⁶⁹

Some north east localities developed ill-deserved reputations as Communist strongholds. The classic example was the village of Chopwell, which was given the epithet of 'Little Moscow' due to the supposed Communist tendencies of its inhabitants.¹⁷⁰ Though the village had been radical since the 1880s, there was, in fact, no CP branch in Chopwell at the time of the General Strike.¹⁷¹ By 1933, although the CP had a Chopwell branch, it only had four members.¹⁷² In the later thirties, apart from two Communist Chopwell lodge officials, there was a 'sprinkling' of CP members in Chopwell who 'never had much influence at all'.¹⁷³ The village consistently returned Labour councillors and Communist candidates were conspicuous by their absence.¹⁷⁴ This contrasts strongly with some 'Little Moscovs' in South Wales, such as Mardy and Bedlinog where the CP supplanted Labour.¹⁷⁵ Yet, on balance Chopwell (which was near Blaydon) probably still deserved its epithet as it did produce many of the most important left wingers in the region including Henry Bolton and the Lawthers, who, though Labour Party members, held views that were largely or completely indistinguishable from those of Communists (see below).¹⁷⁶ In August 1936 the CP had five

¹⁶⁹ J. Hinton, op cit., p152

¹⁷⁰ Some historians were not immune to reproducing this. Jupp and Brown, for example, claimed Chopwell was a Communist stronghold.

J. Jupp, op cit., p229 and K.D. Brown, op cit., pp271-2

¹⁷¹ D. Douglass, 'The Durham Pitman' in R. Samuel (ed.), *Miners, Quarrymen and Slate Workers* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) p273

¹⁷² S. Macintyre, *Little Moscovs. Communism and Working Class Militancy in Inter-war Britain* (Croom Helm, 1980) p20

¹⁷³ Jack Lawther claimed the CP in 1936 'only attracted some 30 odd members from a community of 1000 people' in Chopwell. He thought that the CP remained small 'probably because a lot of people thought they were far too militant' and that attacks on the CP in the national and local press had a great deal of influence on people's attitudes. Jim Stephenson recalled that the Communists had a 'fairly active' branch in Chopwell but did not put a figure on membership.

Jack Lawther Interview, 24/10/94 and J. Adamson, 'A Comment by James Stephenson of Winlaton', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.4 (1970) p29

¹⁷⁴ K. Hordon & A. Wright, *Coal, Community and Conflict. A History of Chopwell* (Hickory Tree Press, Whickham, 1995) pp87 and 101; L. Turnbull, *Chopwell's Story* (Gateshead Borough Council, Gateshead, 1978) and R. Challinor, 'Jimmy Stewart and his Revolting Children', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.17 (1983) pp8-12

See also C. Pickhard, 'Chopwell, "Little Moscow"', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.10 (1976) pp24-26; *Lessons of the Class Struggle*; Andy & Jack Lawther interviewed by Dr Raymond Challinor (Trade Films, Gateshead, 1984); H. Beynon & T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (Rivers Oram Press, 1994) pp202 and 330; Durham Strong Words Collective, *But the World Goes on the Same. Changing Times in Durham Pit Villages* (Strong Words Collective, Erdesdun Publications, Whitley Bay, 1979) pp21-30 and A. Ward, 'Red or Salmon: Chopwell', B.A. Dissertation, Ruskin College (1987)

¹⁷⁵ H. Francis, 'Welsh Miners and the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.5, No.3 (1970) pp177-191

¹⁷⁶ For details on the development of Blaydon and Chopwell, see R. Anderson et al, *A History of Blaydon* (Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, Gateshead, 1975)

councillors in the north east: two in Blyth (of which Breadin was also on Northumberland County Council) and one each on Houghton-le-Spring and Felling UDCs. This was out of a total of 54 Communist councillors in Britain in the period, most of whom were in South Wales and Scottish mining areas.¹⁷⁷ Though a stronger electoral force than the ILP in the region, the CP, outside of certain isolated pockets of support such as that in Croft ward in Blyth, was still negligible. Though Croft ward had a far better claim to be seen as a 'Little Moscow' than Chopwell, even there Communists were far from dominant.¹⁷⁸

It is difficult in practice to determine the extent of Communist influence in the trade unions. As overt Communists were banned from being delegates to trades councils, it was safer for Communists to keep their true political affiliation hidden.¹⁷⁹ Due to CP files kept on individual members in the Manchester archive, Tom Aisbitt can be identified as a crypto-Communist. Presumably it was his influence which involved Newcastle TC in united front activity in 1936 and later.¹⁸⁰ This was important, as Newcastle TC was by far the largest of the fourteen organisations affiliated to the NEFTC. In fact, with a membership of 15,472, Newcastle TC comprised about half the entire NEFTC. The next largest was Blyth TC with 4,440 members, less than a third of Newcastle TC.¹⁸¹ However, this predominance in size did not, as seen above, allow Newcastle TC delegates to dictate NEFTC decisions. The NEFTC did not, for example, support the TJPC, despite Newcastle TC efforts. This was because each trades council had one delegate with one vote on the NEFTC executive.¹⁸² Apart from this, many of the trade union branches involved in united front activity in 1936 and later must have been either directly controlled by Communists or influenced by them. Individual Communists can be identified operating in the executives of some DMA lodges, for example, George Burdess (chairperson of Dawdon lodge), George Cole (Thrislington), George Lumley

¹⁷⁷ The CP reported that there were Communist councillors on the North East Coast, Scotland, South Wales, North Staffs, Suffolk, London, East Kerby and South Normanton. Branson claimed there were about 50 councillors in the period.

CP Central Committee 15th Congress Report, 1938, Reel No.3 (MLHA) and N. Branson, op cit., p146

¹⁷⁸ Two of the six councillors who represented Croft ward on the council were Communists.

¹⁷⁹ This did not of course happen in every case. There were three overt Communist delegates in Bradford TC in 1938 and the TUC was aware of this.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp395-6

¹⁸⁰ Tom Aisbitt biography by Horace Green (MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/1/01)

There is no real indication of the exceptionally left wing nature of Newcastle TC (in the late thirties, at least) in a short book on the topic.

J.F. Clarke & T.P. McDermott, *Newcastle and District Trades Council, 1873-1973. Centenary History* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1973)

¹⁸¹ In 1937 Newcastle TC had 77 affiliated branches. Many branches were not affiliated to it, however (these were 5 NMA, 25 AEU, 7 ASW and 4 NUR branches).

NEFTC return, 1935-6; Newcastle TC return, 1937 and Blyth TC return, 1936 (WMRC, 292/78/44; 292/79N/9 and 292/79B/49)

(Ryhope), George Reay (Baldon) and William Todd (Dean and Chapter).¹⁸³ Burdess represented the residual influence the CP had in Dawdon after its intervention in the Dawdon lockout in 1929, when it implemented its 'class against class' policy with little positive effect.¹⁸⁴ The fact that Dean and Chapter lodge, for one, does not emerge from the evidence of united front activity in 1936 suggests either that the evidence is not comprehensive or that Todd's influence within the lodge was not great. Obviously, had Communists been prominent in more trade union branches, more branches would have been involved in united front activity. The small total number of trade union branches involved in united front activity in 1936 suggests that there was little CP influence in the region. As has been seen, there was only one example of a Communist being brought in to lead an industrial dispute and this was more likely to indicate nothing more than that the individual in question had recognised expertise in conducting industrial disputes, rather than support for the Communist programme and a united front. As in West Yorkshire, the domination of the official labour movement allowed little room on the left for the CP or the ILP. In addition, and similar to Lancashire, the strong non-conformist and Catholic elements of the north east populace were alienated by Communist atheism (see chapter three).¹⁸⁵

Not only did the CP and ILP offer Labour little in terms of resources and influence in the north east, associating with Communists opened Labour up to attack from its political enemies to the right.¹⁸⁶ The experience of Storey's attacks on Sunderland Labour Party for associating with Communists at the mid-August anti-Means Test demonstrations revealed that Conservatives and their press would use any hint of co-operation with Communists to attack Labour. Liberals, too, behaved in this way (see chapter seven). In an area where the CP was weak, Labour's decision to largely reject association with Communists, which it seemed was more likely to damage than benefit the party in the eyes of the electorate, is understandable.

¹⁸² For example, the vote was 13-2 on a NEFTC executive vote regarding Catholics in trades councils (see chapter three).

¹⁸³ George Cole and William Todd autobiographies (MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/2/01 and CP/CENT/PERS/7/03); *Newcastle Journal*, 17/3/37, p3; *Daily Worker*, 20/3/37, p1; 20/7/37, p2; *Shields Gazette*, 17/6/37, p5; K. Armstrong & H. Beynon (eds.), *Hello Are You Working? Memories of the Thirties in the North East of England* (Strong Words Collective, Whitley Bay, 1977) pp80-1 and H. Beynon & T. Austrin, op cit., pp348-357. Beynon and Austrin wrongly spelt Ryhope 'Rythorpe'. (p348)

¹⁸⁴ S. Howard, 'Dawdon in the Third Period: the Dawdon Dispute of 1929 and the Communist Party', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.21 (1987) pp3-16

Burdess' position of influence suggests that Naylor's claim that 'no permanent roots, or tradition', were established by Communist activity in Seaham division requires slight qualification.

B.E. Naylor, 'Ramsay Macdonald and Seaham Labour Politics', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.15 (1981) p31

¹⁸⁵ M. McDermott, 'Irish Catholics and the British Labour Movement: A Study with Particular Reference to London 1918-1970', M.A. Thesis, University of Kent (1978) p127

¹⁸⁶ This was the first of five reasons Fenner Brockway gave for Labour opposition to Communists.

The north east was similar to West Yorkshire. In both regions the Labour Party had 'established a dominant position amongst the industrial working class and had become the main vehicle for workers to express their political voice [...]'.¹⁸⁷ However, even within the regional Labour Party, the left wing was small. A part of the Labour left was organised in the Socialist League, formed by ILP members who wished to remain in the Labour Party when the ILP disaffiliated in 1932. Nationally, the Socialist League had, in March 1934, 74 branches with approximately 3,000 members.¹⁸⁸ There are no membership figures for the north east in general, but there were five branches in the region which were obviously active within the organisation in 1934 and evidence for several others.¹⁸⁹ In February 1935, Gateshead Socialist League branch had 69 members on an updated membership list, 17 of whom were in arrears.¹⁹⁰ This suggests a relatively potent left wing force in official labour movement politics in Gateshead. Yet, judging from Gateshead Socialist League EC minutes (the most significant branch in the region, as it was run by Ruth Dodds), the branch did not concern itself with united front activity before July 1936 (when the minutes end). In fact, all its activity was 'internal'; it was concerned solely with raising funds to send delegates to Socialist League annual conference; making donations to the central organisation and maintaining and renovating its premises (Westfield Hall). Though active in organising some anti-fascist public meetings in the earlier thirties, by 1936 the branch seemed to exist solely to raise money, and did not appear to organise events that drew in those from outside of the organisation or even other members of the official movement.¹⁹¹ Apart from this, the minutes only record internal problems with the ILP over control of Westfield Hall and its resources. This suggests that most of the considerable membership were relatively inactive.¹⁹² Inactivity is also suggested by the fact that the executive committee was meeting more infrequently: nearly eight months had

F. Brockway, *The Workers Front*, p196

¹⁸⁷ D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp391-392

¹⁸⁸ P. Seyd, 'Factionalism Within the Labour Party. The Socialist League, 1932-37' in A. Briggs & J. Saville, *Essays In Labour History, 1918-1939, Vol.3* (Croom Helm, 1977) p208

¹⁸⁹ Region Three of the Socialist League comprised Northumberland, Durham, North and East Yorkshire. Nominations for the National Council came from Chester-le-Street, Gateshead, East Newcastle, Newcastle and Jarrow branches.

Socialist League Conference Agenda, 1934, pp7-15 (MLHA, Box329.15)

There were also Socialist League branches at Wallsend, Durham, Shildon, Elswick (West Newcastle), Annfield Plain, Leadgate and possibly Whitley Bay.

Durham DLP AR, 1936 (D/SO/94); Gateshead Socialist League EC Minutes, 2/3/33 (TWAS, PO/SLI/1); *The Socialist Leaguer*, 6/35; *North Mail*, 24/8/36, p2; 9/2/37, p7; *New Leader*, 11/12/36, p6; *Evening Chronicle*, 8/2/37, p12 and N. Todd, op cit., p80

¹⁹⁰ There were 98 on the old membership list.

Gateshead Socialist League EC Minutes, 20/2/35 (TWAS, PO/SLI/1)

¹⁹¹ N. Todd, op cit., p45

passed between the last recorded meeting in the minute book (on 23 July 1936) and the meeting that immediately preceded it (on 5 December 1935).¹⁹³ Len Edmondson's recollection, that some in Gateshead ILP said that there were 'only ever three of them' in Gateshead Socialist League immediately before it was dissolved in May 1937, reinforces this impression.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, those involved in the Socialist League in the north east seem to have been predominantly middle class. This was certainly the case for Allan Henderson and Dodds.¹⁹⁵ None of the most significant official labour movement working class left wingers bothered to join the Socialist League in the north east. This reflected the national organisation, which suffered from having a leadership of predominantly middle class intellectuals. Though the Socialist League was relatively strong in the north east (and, apart from South Wales and Yorkshire, seemed from its newspaper to be the most active area in the provinces), it remained a London-dominated body with little influence in the unions.¹⁹⁶ In addition, it is likely that some of those who *were* active in the north east Socialist League were hostile to united front co-operation with Communists. As will be seen in chapter four, Dodds, who, as the regional representative on the National Executive, was probably the single most important Socialist League figure in the region, opposed the Unity Campaign in 1937. The evidence suggests that Gateshead Socialist League partly co-operated with the ILP but not the CP in 1936. As the Socialist League shared a premises with the ILP, it would have been difficult *not* to have co-operated with it.¹⁹⁷

Only one significant Labour Party, Blaydon, was controlled by left wingers who were favourably disposed towards the CP (or, in the case of Jim Stephenson, possibly the ILP, of which he had been a member until 1935).¹⁹⁸ Even then, Blaydon DLP does not appear to have been completely dominated by left wingers. Most of these were miners or ex-miners, and in the DMA executive Will Lawther and Sam Watson were also on the left during this period, though they were outnumbered by more moderate figures. Watson had a left wing reputation before he

¹⁹² This is not to say that the branch did nothing. As noted above, it organised some film shows on Spain with the ILP in December 1936. Perhaps the ordinary branch meetings dealt with propaganda matters and the EC was solely responsible for the finances.

¹⁹³ This was the only recorded EC meeting in 1936. In 1935 and 1934 the EC met five times a year (assuming that the minutes recorded every meeting), at roughly two month intervals. This suggests that the branch's momentum was being lost after 1935.

¹⁹⁴ Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98

¹⁹⁵ *The Socialist Leaguer*, 7-8/35

¹⁹⁶ P. Seyd, op cit., p208

¹⁹⁷ However, as will be seen in chapter four, even this feat was eventually achieved.

¹⁹⁸ It was no coincidence that three of the four TJPC delegates to the Brussels Peace conference in autumn 1936 were from the area: Bolton and Stephenson (Labour) and Charles Woods (CP). *Blaydon Courier*, 8/8/36, p5

was elected to the DMA executive.¹⁹⁹ Will Lawther was similar.²⁰⁰ Elected vice-president of the MFGB in 1934, he spoke in 1935 against the Black Circulars at the TUC annual conference.²⁰¹ The following year, he spoke at Labour conference in favour of CP affiliation to Labour, as Communists had helped the miners. Pointing out that Communists had been democratically elected into official positions in some lodges, and emphasising the fact that the Socialist League operated as an organisation within the Labour Party, Lawther said he preferred Communists to those who had left Labour in 1931.²⁰² In October 1936, Lawther explained the MFGB's decision to support Communist affiliation to Labour by citing the recent success of the French popular front government. Arguing that the government had brought improvements for French workers, Lawther highlighted the CP's pivotal role 'in pressing for the adoption of such a vigorous policy and in stressing the need for united action to carry out such a policy'.²⁰³ Unity, essential in the fight against fascism, would also bring 'that new vigour that comes from the realisation of united strength'.²⁰⁴ Beynon and Austrin claimed that Lawther and Watson typified a new secular, socialist tradition, which began emerging into DMA leadership positions in the thirties. The death of Peter Lee in 1935 (who was replaced by Watson) marked the end of a continuity sustained by the Methodist chapel. Though the election of these two marked a critical shift in the DMA leadership it did not mark a complete break with the past as Lawther, for one, though *politically* a left winger, was not, by 1936, an *industrial* militant. In other words, he was keen to promote dialogue and conciliation with the mine owners and reluctant to support industrial action.²⁰⁵ Apart from Lawther, there were two other notable left wingers in the region; C.P. Trevelyan and Ellen Wilkinson. Trevelyan was an aristocrat who retired from Westminster politics after his electoral defeat in 1931. He was a well-respected Labour grandee, having served in the first and second Labour governments at Education. He provided the first Labour government, along with Wheatley's Housing Act,

¹⁹⁹ H. Beynon & T. Austrin, op cit., pp357-361

²⁰⁰ L.H. Mates, op cit., passim

²⁰¹ TUC AR, 1935, p262

²⁰² Labour Party AR, 1936, p210

²⁰³ W. Lawther, 'Before the Labour Party Conference', *Labour Monthly*, Vol.18 (October, 1936) p598

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p599

²⁰⁵ Lawther defied convention and spoke in support of Watson against George Harvey in the final round of voting. This was possibly due to a dispute at Harvey's colliery, Follonsby, in 1935, which saw Harvey come into sharp conflict with the DMA executive. Lawther, especially, was on the receiving end of some strong protest in the village.

H. Beynon & T. Austrin, op cit., pp338, 348, 351, 354, 359-362; D. Douglass, *Pit Life in County Durham. Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control* (History Workshop Pamphlet No.6, Ruskin College, Oxford, 1972) pp76-78 and D. Douglass, *The Miners of North Durham* (Socialist Union Pamphlet No.3, Doncaster, 1975) pp29-30

with its most notable domestic achievement.²⁰⁶ Ellen Wilkinson, the MP for Jarrow and an ex-Communist, was the most left wing Labour MP in the region. However she was, as will be seen, moving right-wards in this period. These were the only Labour left figures of national standing in the region.²⁰⁷ There were other left wing miners dotted about the region such as George Harvey (Follonsby) and Will Pearson (Marsden) who had views indistinguishable from those of Communists, but their influence was limited largely to their particular lodges and does not seem to have significantly extended into the DLPs of which they were members, despite them both being prominent Labour councillors.²⁰⁸ These few organisations and individuals in the official movement were the exceptions.

In addition to the negative effects of being seen to be associating with Communists, Fenner Brockway gave four further reasons for Labour's opposition to Communists: their disruptive tactics which had caused labour movement leaders a lot of nuisance over many years; a dislike of the dictatorship in Soviet Russia; distrust of Communists due to their reputation for double-dealing and disloyalty and opposition to the determining of Communist policy from abroad.²⁰⁹ Many of these aspects were expressed in a speech by John Yarwood, a north east NUGMW official. Yarwood castigated Communists as 'glib-tongued tools of Moscow' who, he claimed, were 'responsible for recent dissension' in the north east labour movement: 'the trouble-makers in our midst must be dealt with with an iron hand [...] and sent back to their sponsor to admit the ignominious failure of their underhand tactics. What reasonable negotiation could not accomplish, anarchy [sic.] could never do'.²¹⁰ Presumably, the majority of those in the official north east labour movement shared Yarwood's sentiments. However, there is strikingly little evidence of overt anti-Communism in the speeches of north east labour movement activists in 1936; the example from Yarwood came in July 1937 (see chapter four). Perhaps the 'threat' was so negligible in the region that official movement leaders did not deem it worthwhile to spend time condemning Communists. Certainly, there was no evidence of anti-Communists in the labour movement publicly citing the Show Trials in

²⁰⁶ Given Trevelyan's importance on the Labour left in the second half of the thirties, it is difficult to understand why his biographer chose to mention practically nothing of this period in his political career. Following electoral defeat in 1931, Morris discussed the rest of Trevelyan's career in a minuscule six-page epilogue. There is some mention of his career 1932-35, but none at all after this date.

A.J.A. Morris, *C.P. Trevelyan, 1870-1958. Portrait of a Radical* (Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1977)

²⁰⁷ These three were, as shall be seen, joined in the later thirties by two young rebel Labour PPCs, but they remained relatively isolated and lacked a significant established following within the official labour movement in the region.

²⁰⁸ G. Walker, 'George Harvey and Industrial Unionism', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.17 (1983) pp21-4; L.H. Mates, op cit., and R. Challinor, 'Jack Parks, Memories of a Militant', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.9 (1975) p34

²⁰⁹ F. Brockway, *The Workers Front*, pp196-7

²¹⁰ *Newcastle Journal*, 5/7/37, p9

the Soviet Union to reinforce their case against Communism which, according to Murphy, was an important factor in undermining support for both the united and popular fronts.²¹¹ A diminutive Communist presence in the region meant that many in the official labour movement had had little practical experience of Communists, especially in the sectarian 'third period', which probably would have fortified what the national leadership had said about them.²¹²

There were other factors militating against united and popular front co-operation. When official labour movement organisations did involve themselves with proscribed bodies, the national leadership was often ready to intervene to ensure that their affiliates were not seduced. This was the reason for Felling TC's withdrawal from the NUWM conference in spring 1936 (see before). The TUC informed Felling TC that it would be 'violating' its 'pledge' of support for the Black Circular if it were to be represented at the conference.²¹³ For the TUC, Harries chided Felling TC for allowing the 'initiative to pass to a group of Communists, and meekly follow behind' and argued that the NEFTC should be taking the initiative on the matter.²¹⁴ Felling TC replied humbly that its delegates had been instructed not to attend the next conference.²¹⁵ As noted above though, Felling TC was not actually pro-united front. Had it been more ideologically committed to co-operation with Communists, perhaps its response to the TUC would have been more defiant.

Defiance of the TUC did not necessarily lead to oblivion. Bradford TC defied the TUC when it was instructed to replace its three Communist delegates in 1938. When the TUC threatened disciplinary action, the most high profile of the three resigned from the trades council, which made a point of recognising his service to it. The TUC took no further action against the two remaining delegates. This may have been an oversight. Alternatively, perhaps the TUC did not desire further conflict with a strong-willed trades council. A third alternative is that the TUC correctly supposed that with the absence of the most experienced and influential of the three CP delegates, the party would lose its influence on the trades council. This is what occurred, as Bradford TC did not support any CP initiative or campaign between 1938-1939. It seems that Bradford TC's stance on the Communists reflected a commitment to

²¹¹ D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, pp436-7

²¹² The fact that the British labour movement tended to ignore Communists, due to the small size of the party and the 'insular habits' of British thinking meant that Labour also tended to ignore both the situation in other countries and the importance of the Russian CP in international affairs. This was even more so for the north east.

F. Brockway, *The Workers Front*, p197

²¹³ Harries letter to G.R.F. Adams, 4/3/36 (WMRC, 292/777.1/9)

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*,

²¹⁵ G.R.F. Adams letter to Harries, 14/3/36 and reply, 16/3/36 (WMRC, 292/777.1/9)

the idea that it alone should decide with whom to organise and, to an extent, it succeeded.²¹⁶ The lack of examples of united front activity in the TUC files for the north east suggests that, generally, the TUC had no need to prevent official movement organisations from involving themselves with Communists. Alternatively, perhaps the TUC was simply not able to monitor all its affiliated organisations as efficiently as it would have liked and some were thus able to involve themselves in united front activity without receiving censure. The knowledge that they were possibly being scrutinised by their leaders and would be admonished for misdemeanours must have acted as a disincentive to involvement with Communists. Unfortunately, the potency of this disincentive cannot be known: precisely how many organisations would have co-operated with Communists in the north east had Transport House not taken such a hands-on approach in ensuring they adhered to the rules is a matter for conjecture only.

It must also be recognised that the 'control freakery' of the national labour movement leadership depended on a strong degree of rank-and-file loyalty. Generally speaking, loyalty to the official movement as embodied by its national leadership was very strong in the north east. Loyalty meant that national leadership decisions were largely adhered to. Loyalty did *not* mean that labour movement organisations in the region agreed with everything that the national leadership said and did. This can be illustrated by the reactions of trades councils in the region to the TUC's Black Circular (Circular Sixteen) which sought to prevent members of proscribed organisations (Communist and fascist) from attending trades councils as delegates. The interesting aspect of many of the responses to Circular Sixteen is that they were somewhat equivocal. This suggests that there was arguably considerable disquiet at the leadership's stance, but that most local organisations reluctantly went along with it, rather than appear to be disloyal.

Some trades councils did of course provide openly and obviously anti-Communist responses to the TUC. Although admitting ignorance of the Black Circular, Tynemouth TC assured head office that they refused entry to Communists.²¹⁷ Jarrow LP&TC was categorical in its statement that it was 'not involved in any way with outside bodies' nor were union branch delegates on it from any 'disruptive organisations'.²¹⁸ South Shields LP&TC enforced the Black Circular taking 'strong action' when 'disruptive elements' attempted to attend.²¹⁹ Blyth TC had received several communications from Communists but had not entered into

²¹⁶ D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, pp395-398

²¹⁷ B.A. Chater letter to TUC, 19/1/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/16)

²¹⁸ A.A. Rennie letter to Citrine, 26/1/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/12)

²¹⁹ South Shields LP&TC AR, 1934 (WMRC, 292/79S/37)

In a letter dated 19/1/35 to the TUC the body promised to 'rigorously carry out' the General Council's instructions. (WMRC, 292/777.1/15)

correspondence.²²⁰ Presumably Jarrow LP&TC and South Shields LP&TC defined 'disruptive organisations' in the same way as the TUC leadership.

Other trades council responses were more ambiguous. In early 1934 Felling TC reported that it had never allowed anyone opposed to the Labour Party and TUC to be represented as a delegate.²²¹ Depending on an individual's political viewpoint, this could include the CP or not. Blaydon, Chester-le-Street, Hebburn and Sunderland TCs responded that they had never encountered Communists but did not explicitly express support for their exclusion.²²² The response of Newcastle TC is so curious that its truthfulness can be doubted. It reported that the CP had approached it 'on several occasions recently with the object of joint working arrangements' but on each occasion the executive refused the request. However, a small minority did not agree and an effort was to be made to discuss the question again. Short, the secretary, had 'no doubt' that the delegates would again approve of the ban on these organisations.²²³ This indication of minority opposition to Circular Sixteen seems a little odd given that Newcastle TC was, as will be seen, involved in all united and popular front activity 1936-1939. It is, of course, possible that the attitudes of its members altered in a more pro-united front direction after early 1935. Alternatively, perhaps Short was dissembling. Ultimately, trades councils that did not comply on the issue of Communist exclusion were struck off. In the north east, only Wallsend TC dared to openly defy Transport House. It let Circular Sixteen lie on the table with some members arguing that the General Council 'would be better engaged fighting the common enemy instead of taking this step against members of the working class [...]'.²²⁴ Yet Wallsend TC eventually decided to fall in line as it was appreciated what would happen if it refused.²²⁵ A struck-off trades council was a lame duck in local labour movement politics and would soon be replaced with another official one. The officials of the 'rebel' trades council could not expect to regain their positions of power in any new, officially sanctioned body and this, too, must have acted as a strong disincentive to defy the TUC. Loyalty to the movement combined with a national leadership that closely scrutinised its affiliated organisations and was prepared to use draconian measures against dissidents must have ensured that at least some potential united or popular front activity, particularly on the

²²⁰ T.A. Brown letter to Citrine, 21/1/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/5)

²²¹ Felling TC letter to TUC, 12/1/34 (WMRC, 292/777.1/9)

²²² Letters from E. Colgan (n.d.); T. Anderson (11/3/35); S. Mason, (14/1/36) and J. Hadden (5/11/34) to TUC (WMRC, 292/777.1/5; 292/777.1/7; 292/777.1/11 and 292/777.1/15)

²²³ W. Short letter to Citrine, 20/1/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/13)

²²⁴ J. Watson letter to Citrine, 30/3/35 (WMRC, 292/777.1/17)

²²⁵ The same thing happened elsewhere. In October 1935, Bradford TC ended its long standing opposition to the Black Circular in response to a TUC threat to withdraw recognition if it failed to comply with national policy. In practice, Bradford TC still did not enforce the Black Circular.

industrial side, did not materialise. There were, though, limits to national discipline, particularly on the political side of the movement. Noting that North Oxfordshire DLP was disaffiliated due to its co-operation with Communists, Swift pointed out that the NEC could not disaffiliate too many DLPs as Labour would cease to be a national party. Consequently, Labour leaders had little choice but to ignore much of what went on.²²⁶ Of course, there was little for them to worry about in the north east in 1936.

The Labour left exercised little influence within the official movement in the region and the CP and ILP were too small in most localities to offer significant benefits in any united front activity. The official labour movement, characterised by a moderate political outlook, dominated on the left.²²⁷ Nationally, Labour represented the majority of north east Parliamentary seats in 1936 (13 out of 24; which was two more than the government). In many local councils too, the Labour Party dominated and did not require the help of any other party to retain control. However, there were parts of the north east where Labour could possibly have benefited from understandings with the CP or Liberals. Other characteristics of official labour movement politics in the region also ensured that advocates of both the united and popular fronts were faced with a very difficult task. These characteristics are discussed in the following chapter.

D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, p238

²²⁶ J. Swift, *op cit.*, pp271-2

²²⁷ As Mason pointed out, the surge in CP membership immediately after the General Strike did not last long and Labour was the chief beneficiary of the increasing radicalisation, developing a 'virtual monopoly' in mining areas. However, this not to say that the regional labour movement never adopted a militant stance (see chapter five).

A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East*, p102

CHAPTER TWO

Disunity in the Official Labour Movement

The official labour movement was a federation of organisations. At the most general level it was divided between industrial and political organisations (trade unions and Labour Parties respectively). Each union had branches and a central organisation for the north east region, normally based in Newcastle. In addition, trades councils organised branches of all trade unions in several larger localities and acted as local TUCs. Divisional Labour Parties themselves comprised individual members organised in wards and branches and the affiliated members of local trade union branches.¹ In some areas, for example Gateshead and South Shields, the trades councils and Labour Party were joint bodies. Elsewhere, such as in Newcastle, the trades council and City Labour Party were distinct entities which behaved in quite different ways. The complex organisation of the labour movement at local level allowed for many different kinds of friction between the different facets of the movement on many levels. Conflict resulted from power struggles within different levels of the regional labour movement for superiority, often manifested in clashes of ideology or personality (though the two were often very difficult to distinguish). It is important to comprehend this situation before the successes and failures of the Unity Campaign can be discussed. Most historians of the period have concentrated on the national picture and said little about the situation at regional and local level, thus largely neglecting this important aspect of grass roots labour movement organisation and activity.²

Disputes Between Labour Movement Organisations

The relationship between the main industrial and political labour movement organisations in County Durham was likely to be combative. The DMA was the largest trade union in the north east with around 125,000 members.³ In County Durham, apart from the

¹ Fenner Brockway, critiquing the Labour Party in 1938, noted that it was unlike its European counterparts as, though they invariably associated with trade unions, they were composed entirely of individual members. Thus they were not dominated by the undemocratic trade union block vote. In Britain, trade unions were all-powerful as trade union branches also affiliated to DLPs, which effectively gave them double representation in the Labour Party.

F. Brockway, *The Workers Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) pp208-10

² Though of course rivalries between trades unions, for example, existed as much at national as at regional or local level. Mason noted that before the General Strike in 1926 the trade union movement had no unified strategy due to the jealously guarded traditional autonomy of individual unions.

A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, No.3, University of Hull, Hull, 1970) p3

³ In 1911 there were 152,000 miners in Durham who accounted for nearly 30% all jobs in the county, and these were only those directly employed in the industry.

shipbuilding and engineering areas of south Tyneside and Sunderland and small pockets of NUR membership, such as that at Shildon, DMA dominance of the trade union landscape was total.⁴ Consequently, it contributed the majority of members and most of the funds to Labour Parties in the county. The DMA's conversion to the cause of Labour was complete by the thirties. But 'this was achieved without the development of vibrant constituency parties. The Party was very much established as the political arm of the trade union'.⁵ The fact that trade unions, and especially the DMA, organised political life in County Durham spawned resentment from some on the political side of the movement.⁶

Tensions between the DMA and Durham County Labour Party became apparent in March 1937, a matter of two months into the Unity Campaign. A conflict arose when Will Lawther of the DMA executive attacked alderman W.H. Smith's decision, as chairperson of Washington secondary school's governors, to invite the reactionary Lord Londonderry to give the prizes on speech day.⁷ Smith, who also chaired Durham County Council Labour Party group, claimed that Lawther 'believes the Miner's Hall is a kind of glorified Kremlin' and asserted that he would not be dictated to by the DMA.⁸ Lawther responded by asking whether the DMA's financial aid to Labour could be deemed 'dictation'.⁹ Smith's response to Lawther indicated a degree of resentment towards the DMA's power over the Labour Party in County Durham, due to its role as the most significant source of party funds. Yet the dispute had a strong ideological aspect. Smith's association with Londonderry (or at least his lack of a desire to dissociate himself), who was a Nazi apologist at this time, suggested that he was on the right of the labour movement, as does his implying that Lawther was a Communist.¹⁰ The gulf

'The regional identity of north east England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in E. Royle (ed.), *Issues of Regional Identity* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998) p110

⁴ For general information on the railwaymen at Shildon see F. Lawson, 'Railwaymen in the North East of England, 1890-1930: Industrial and Political Attitudes and Policies', M.Phil. Thesis, Open University (1995) passim

⁵ H. Beynon & T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (Rivers Oram Press, 1994) pp340-1

⁶ *Ibid.*, pxxvi

Here 'political' is used in the narrow sense, to distinguish it from the industrial side of the labour movement. Of course, disputes within industrial organisations could be political, but then every human activity can be construed as in some sense political.

⁷ For more on Lord Londonderry see chapter seven.

⁸ *North Mail*, 18/3/37, p9

Lawther was very annoyed by this incident. At a DCFLP conference in November 1938, Lawther rebuked Labour Party members who invited Conservatives to their functions. He referred to a recent visit of a Conservative to open a new agricultural school and the Londonderry incident two years before.

Durham Chronicle, 4/11/38, p11

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19/3/37, p18

¹⁰ Though to the left in this period and certainly sympathetic to the CP, Lawther said, in his retirement, that he had never been a CP member nor had he ever had 'any inclination to be a member'.

J.F. Clarke, 'An Interview With Sir Will Lawther', *Bulletin of the Society For the Study of Labour History*, Vol.18 (1969) p21

in political beliefs between Lawther and Smith was clearly very considerable. Of course, tensions between the industrial and political wings of the labour movement manifested themselves on the ground elsewhere. In Birmingham, for example, relations between the Birmingham Borough Labour Party and Birmingham TC were not harmonious. Birmingham TC became disillusioned with politics after the 1931 debacle and concentrated more on industrial matters. It was to the right of the Labour Party and became increasingly opposed to the party's attempted co-operation with the CP and support for the popular front. Spain and rearmament were also divisive issues as the trades council criticised the party for concentrating too much on Spain rather than domestic affairs.¹¹ This situation, with the industrial side to the right of the party, was the opposite of the County Durham example. However, even the relatively left wing DMA, as will be seen, remained loyal to the Labour Party. The curious feature of the official north east labour movement is that, unlike Birmingham, none of the extensive internal divisions discussed in this chapter appear to have been directly related to the united or popular fronts. The north east movement did not need controversies over alliances with Communists and/or Liberals to find itself dangerously divided.

There was potential for more conflict between the DMA and County Durham Labour Party when the Moderates proposed a truce for the 1937 Durham County Council elections, arguing that, as the county was a distressed area, this would save the council money.¹² Will Lawther opposed the idea arguing: 'To have a truce with the party of death and disease would mean death to our movement'.¹³ A Conservative attacked Lawther for this stance and claimed that many Labour county councillors supported the idea.¹⁴ In fact, apart from Conservative claims, evidence of Labour support for the truce was non-existent. Lawther claimed 'solid support' from Durham Labour MPs and this was reflected in DLP's attitudes.¹⁵ Four DLPs (Durham, Consett, Seaham and Sedgfield) pronounced against the idea, as did Jarrow LP&TC despite the fact that the party had enjoyed a municipal election truce, which they suggested, with Moderates in Jarrow due to the Jarrow march.¹⁶ Despite the lack of obvious conflict over the proposed truce, the spat between Lawther and Smith, and particularly the fact

¹¹ P.D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's Response to the Spanish Civil War With Particular Reference to the Labour Movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, Birmingham University (1977) pp92, 135-7, 146, 156-7 and 160

¹² *North Mail*, 1/12/36, p1

¹³ *Ibid.*, 25/11/36, p5

¹⁴ *Sunday Sun*, 28/2/37, p13

¹⁵ *North Mail*, 28/11/36, p7

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30/11/36, p5 and 1/12/36, p1

Will's brother Steve also opposed the truce.

Blaydon Courier, 20/2/37, p20

that it was conducted in public, indicated that the relationship between the DMA and County Durham Labour Party was far from harmonious at this time.

Rivalries between the populations of different localities in the region were sometimes reflected in conflict between labour movement organisations. For example, there was a damaging demarcation dispute in this period between Newcastle TC and Gateshead LP&TC. Newcastle TC complained in 1928 that Gateshead LP&TC had three Newcastle NUR branches affiliated to it. The complaint was upheld by the NEFTC and the TUC but the situation had not changed by 1938.¹⁷ The dispute also reflected a general rivalry between the two cities. D.J. Rowe commented that 'Gateshead has never forgiven the quip that it was a "long [sometimes the adjective is 'dirty'] lane leading to Newcastle"'.¹⁸ This resentment also manifested itself in Catholic and non-Catholic clashes in the north east labour movement (see chapter three).

Divisions Within Labour Parties

At the same time as the DMA was in public dispute with Durham Labour Party, there was a rash of internal Labour Party disputes throughout the region. Though coinciding with the first two months of the Unity Campaign, these were, with one exception, totally unconnected to the campaign. As shall be seen in chapter four, it was only at Shildon that the Unity Campaign split the official movement, resulting in the expulsion of two Labour councillors. There were far more examples of internal disputes that appear to have had nothing to do with the united front and support for the CP.

The County Council, RDC and UDC elections of spring 1937 saw a marked proliferation of internal conflicts. At Thornley, a disagreement arose in February 1937 between the Easington RDC Labour group under councillor E.F. Peart, secretary of Seaham DLP, and councillor Herbert Tunney over allegations of 'irregularities' in housing administration. Thornley miners' lodge, of which Tunney was chairperson, appointed eleven of their own candidates in opposition to official Labour for Thornley Parish Council. The executive of Seaham DLP then expelled Tunney who, defiant, stood unsuccessfully as a trade union candidate against official Labour candidates in the Durham County Council and Easington RDC elections.¹⁹ Ex-Labour councillors or disgruntled would-be councillors stood against

¹⁷ John Yarwood (NEFTC secretary) letter to TUC, 8/3/28 and TC Joint Consultative Committee letter to Yarwood, 24/4/28 (MLHA, 292/79G/2) and

J.F. Clarke & T.P. McDermott, *Newcastle and District Trades Council, 1873-1973. Centenary History* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1973) p34

¹⁸ Although it seems a little strange to attribute personality to a city, the enmity was, and remains, real. D.J. Rowe, 'The North East', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume One. Regions and Communities* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990) p417

¹⁹ An enquiry ordered by Easington RDC had cleared the administration.

official Labour candidates at six wards in Durham County Council. In Jarrow, two unofficial Labour candidates were the only 'rebels' elected. There were also unofficial Labour candidatures at Consett (three), Brandon and Byshottles (three), Houghton-le-Spring (two), Bedlington (two), Whickham (two) and Blaydon (one) UDCs. A single 'rebel' was victorious at Whickham, Houghton-le-Spring and Consett UDCs. As discussed below, the situation in Jarrow was exceptional. In most cases, the unofficial candidates' grievances at Labour's candidate selection procedure precipitated their standing in opposition to their party.²⁰ It is not clear, however, precisely why these 'rebels' were not selected as candidates, so it is impossible to assess the extent to which ideology, and particularly support of left causes, caused these divisions within Labour Parties.²¹ Elsewhere, Newcastle City Labour Party split between the City Council Labour group and City Labour Party executive over the nominee for sheriff. Though the executive instructed the council group to select councillor James Pearson, most of the Labour group voted for councillor A.D. Russell, who received 55 votes to Pearson's nine. The executive decided against expelling the seventeen rebels but in favour of undisclosed disciplinary action.²²

Other Labour Parties suffered from long running internal fractures, which the call for 'unity' from the left could do nothing to alleviate. Gateshead Labour Party had several different and often conflicting factions within it. In June 1937, after several months of the Unity Campaign, tensions within Gateshead Labour Party bubbled to the surface as an alleged 'plot' by some in the party to oust other Labour councillors came to light. This division was between Catholics and non-Catholics in the party and is discussed in more detail in chapter three. The circumstances surrounding the termination of Bart Kelly's position as Gateshead Labour PPC in September 1938 revealed that trade union rivalries, especially those between the miners and railwaymen, also divided the party. A nominee of Ravensworth lodge (DMA), Kelly had defeated the NUR nominee to become PPC in 1936.²³ Councillor M. Hailes, of the

North Mail, 4/2/37, p7; 5/2/37, p2; 6/2/37, p1; 20/2/37, p7; 23/2/37, p5; 24/2/37, p7; 1/3/37, p10; 3/3/37, p7; *Evening Chronicle*, 3/3/37, p9; *Durham Chronicle*, 5/2/37, pp2 and 6; 26/2/37, p11 and 26/3/37, p6

²⁰ *North Mail*, 13/2/37, p7; 16/2/37, p8; 27/2/37, p5; 2/3/37, p5; 3/3/37, p7; 15/3/37, p6; 16/3/37, p5; 20/3/37, p4; 25/3/37, p7; 6/4/37, pp6, 7 and 9; 15/4/37, p5; 27/4/37, p5; *Evening Chronicle*, 3/3/37, p9 and 6/4/37, p8

²¹ Herbert Lawther, brother of Will, Steve and Andy, was one of the rebels in Consett UDC after being nominated by his NUGMW branch to contest a seat but then not selected by Medomsley Labour Party. Lawther condemned the party's 'Hitler methods' and could not understand why he had been treated in such a way. Yet Lawther does not appear to have been as left wing as his brothers and there is no evidence that he supported the united front. He may have been discriminated against because of some grudge against his brothers, but there are a number of other alternatives.

North Mail, 16/2/37, p8; *Blaydon Courier*, 6/3/37, p18; 13/3/37, p20 and 20/3/37, p23

²² Seventeen Labour councillors voted against the party, four voted for Pearson and six abstained.

North Mail, 16/2/37, p7; 18/2/37, p5 and 23/2/37, p1

²³ *Ibid.*, 31/8/38, p5

NUR, alleged that Kelly had ‘not played the game’ as he had not signed an adoption form which carried a guarantee of financial backing.²⁴ Kelly was not an official DMA candidate and consequently had not secured funding. Hailes claimed that he had first highlighted Kelly’s lack of financial backing when he was nominated, but this had not prevented his adoption and subsequent ‘haggling’. A bitter Kelly accused a section of Gateshead Labour Party, and especially the railwaymen, of ‘continually attacking me behind my back. [...] No candidate could succeed unless he has a strong and united party behind him and that does not exist in Gateshead’.²⁵ What the historian Manders deemed the ‘railway element’ had defeated Kelly.²⁶ In criticising apathy in Gateshead Labour Party, Kelly praised the Communists as the most active element in the working class movement.²⁷ These comments suggest that Kelly was on the left, as does his support for the popular front in 1938 (see chapter six). However, it is unlikely that his ousting was also partly due to his left wing political position as he was eventually replaced with the left wing Konni Zilliacus. This suggests that Gateshead Labour Party was prepared (and perhaps even keen) to select left wingers, provided they brought funding with them. Coming from outside Gateshead, Zilliacus was a ‘neutral’ candidate in terms of the rivalry between local NUR and DMA members and this also partly explains his adoption.

Animosity between different trade unions within DLPs was not confined to Gateshead. In Bishop Auckland DLP, a personal rivalry between Will Davis, a miner’s son turned headmaster, and J.R.S. Middlewood, a station master and former train driver, personified the rivalry between the three main groupings in Bishop Auckland DLP: the railwaymen, teachers and miners. The main divisions were based on occupation and geography, rather than ideology, the worst split being between the railwaymen of Shildon and miners of Bishop Auckland town. Middlewood’s dislike of Davis was due to differences of class and education. A large middle class block in the party aroused suspicion.²⁸

²⁴ Ibid., 1/9/38, p2

²⁵ Ibid.,

Kelly also deplored the absence of youth in the party and called for a purge of the party’s ‘reactionary element’ to make local politics ‘virile’.

Durham Chronicle, 2/9/38, p11

²⁶ F.W.D. Manders, *A History of Gateshead* (Gateshead Corporation, Gateshead, 1973) p283

²⁷ The CP used this internal division to attempt to further its own relations with the Labour Party. The CP North East District Committee sent a letter to Gateshead Labour Party expressing appreciation at Kelly’s remarks about the CP, but disassociated itself from Kelly’s claims about Gateshead Labour Party. Conceding that there ‘are many weaknesses in the movement’, the CP still thought that Gateshead Labour Party had ‘shown itself to be an active party anxious to carry on the fight against the Government’. However, this attempt at building co-operation did not appear to yield any fruit (see chapter four).

North Mail, 1/9/38, p2

²⁸ B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) pp177-179

In Blaydon a left wing dominated Labour Party clashed with more moderate elements on the industrial side (although, of course, most of the left political figures involved were also prominent in their respective industrial spheres).²⁹ In contrast to Gateshead and Bishop Auckland, the Blaydon labour movement split along ideological lines in October 1936 when Blaydon Burn Joint Collieries Welfare Committee refused Blaydon Socialist Sunday School the use of Blaydon miners' hall for the annual celebrations of the Tyneside Union of Socialist Sunday Schools. Jim Stephenson, involved in the Socialist Sunday School and incensed at the decision, pointed out that Conservatives, Liberals and others used the hall.³⁰ But, Stephenson thought, the Socialist Sunday School organisers were 'what we know in India as untouchables'.³¹ In a letter defending the committee's actions Alfred Wharton, secretary of Bessie Pit Lodge, said, cryptically, that the Socialist Sunday School was denied use of the hall due to rumours about what the school taught. Stephenson argued that the real reason was that the Welfare Committee were 'flat earthers' and 'Labour, not Socialist'.³² He attacked the 'stupid and untrue' rumours and invited Wharton to visit the school and see for himself.³³ This did not allay the situation as at the end of October Wharton became more explicit about his objections. He claimed that the school was 'merely the propaganda of the Communist Party [...] anyone who has had any dealings with these people knows how cleverly they can hide their real object behind their apparent innocence'.³⁴ He also pointed out that previously Stephenson had said "[...] there was no time for differences in the Labour ranks". Apparently this should only apply when councillor Stephenson and friends get all their own way'.³⁵ Steve Lawther then attempted to undermine this anti-Communism by revealing that Wharton himself had chaired a meeting of the Blaydon and District Hunger March Council of which Wilf Jobling, a Communist, was secretary. The controversy seemed to end with a long article on the Socialist Sunday School by Lawther.³⁶

²⁹ The Blaydon labour movement was split ideologically between the political and industrial sides, as the Catholic Ted Colgan was the key figure in Blaydon TC. It is surprising that his name did not figure in the attacks on the Socialist Sunday School, given his aversion to Communism (see chapter three).

³⁰ *North Mail*, 5/10/36, p7

³¹ *Blaydon Courier*, 10/10/36, p8

Letters from Emmie Lawther (Steve's wife) and 'A Regular Reader' supported Stephenson. Claiming that the dispute had caused a 'very bitter feeling' in Blaydon labour movement, Wharton responded to these criticisms the following week.

Blaydon Courier, 17/10/36, p5

³² *North Mail*, 12/10/36, p6

³³ *Ibid.*, 17/10/36, p6

³⁴ *Blaydon Courier*, 31/10/36 p5

³⁵ *Ibid.*,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 21/11/36, p5

The issue again came to the fore when the editor of the *Blaydon Courier* wrote a very favourable article on it in April 1938.

Whilst revealing of an ideological rift in the Blaydon labour movement, the controversy over the Socialist Sunday School seems to have been relatively short-lived. The most extreme example of the lack of an 'internal united front' in the north east in the period was that of Jarrow Labour Party where, perhaps due to the plight of the town, internal unity might reasonably be expected to have been strong. Moreover, the internecine in-fighting that was to split the Jarrow labour movement for most of this period was, paradoxically, sparked off by events surrounding the Jarrow March, a non-political, cross-party effort.

Before the Jarrow march began, the Labour Party members most involved with its organisation were unhappy about the lack of support from their colleagues and the opposition from the national Labour Party to the effort. Following their return from London, four of the march organisers, Labour councillors D.F. Riley (the march marshal), Patrick Scullion, J. Hanlon and alderman Joseph Symonds, alleged that funds for the Jarrow marchers were wasted by Labour Party members who did not go on the march. The four renegades had the whip withdrawn, a decision which jeopardised the Labour majority of two on the town council, and were later expelled. In February 1937, W.E. Hopper, chairperson of Jarrow Labour Party and another of the march organisers who had previously been opposed to the 'rebel' group and its claims, changed his mind. Hopper decided to stand against a Labour candidate in Durham County Council elections because he thought that the four had been treated unfairly. He was then expelled and joined them.³⁷ At the March 1937 County Council elections, rebels Hopper and Riley, both incumbents, secured emphatic victories, defeating official Labour candidates into third place. The meeting of the new County Council saw the first of many 'scenes' between the official Labour councillors and members of Jarrow Progressive Labour Party (JPLP), as the rebels now called themselves. The police were called to eject Hopper.³⁸ Similar uproar followed in Jarrow council.³⁹ This time Hopper was joined by Scullion as both castigated Labour for making a 'united front pact' with the Moderates. Riley condemned the 'remarkable demonstrations of fascism for such a one horse town'.⁴⁰ Jarrow Labour Party expelled fifteen members due to their links with the rebels and threatened other councillors who associated with them with a similar punishment. A newspaper editorial commented at the

Ibid., 8/4/38, pp1 and 8

³⁷ *North Mail*, 9/10/36, p7; 17/11/36, p3; 30/12/36, p7; 5/1/37, p5; 6/1/37, p7; 9/1/37, p3; 17/2/37, p9; 22/2/37, p5; *Durham Chronicle*, 15/1/37, p3; *Sunday Sun*, 21/2/37, p15; *Daily Worker*; 22/2/37, p5; *Shields Gazette*, 21/10/36, p4 and 17/2/37, p1

³⁸ *North Mail*, 3/3/37, p7; 17/3/37, p5; 31/3/37, p7; 6/4/37, p5; *Sunday Sun*, 14/3/37, p17; *Durham Chronicle*, 19/3/37, p9; *Shields Gazette*, 17/3/37, p3 and p5

³⁹ There were no regular reports of any of the councils' activities in the larger regional papers. It seems that some kind of controversy was needed in order to make council business 'newsworthy', hence the extensive newspaper coverage of Jarrow council business.

end of April 1937: 'That united front Jarrow still needs to present is further distant so long as this unhappy wrangle continues'.⁴¹

Ostensibly, the dispute at Jarrow had serious ramifications for the united front as JPLP members directed many of their attacks on 'Communists' within Jarrow Labour Party.⁴² If JPLP were to be believed, Communism was acting as a divisive force within the official movement. However, it is difficult to determine the validity of these allegations. In June 1937 the Labour mayor denied that there were any Communists in the party, saying that some may have been CP members before joining Labour; 'but on joining they had to agree to the new constitution'.⁴³ However, writing in 1939, Ellen Wilkinson (herself an ex-Communist) added credence to JPLP claims. The Jarrow CP secretary told Wilkinson that there were only seven members of Jarrow CP branch in the thirties, 'five of whom also held cards in the Labour Party'.⁴⁴ Harry Clarke, a young left winger at the time, partly confirmed and partly contradicted this. Clarke, who knew all the members of Jarrow CP in the late thirties, stated that only one person, Bill Rounce, was a member of both the CP and Labour Party concurrently.⁴⁵ The Jarrow CP membership figure of seven, which has been taken as fact by some authorities subsequently, was nearer the truth.⁴⁶ Harry Clarke claimed that there were only eight or nine people in the Jarrow and Hebburn branch of the CP in the late thirties.⁴⁷ In January 1936, Hebburn LP&TC reported to the TUC that there were no 'disruptive bodies' (i.e. Communists) in the Hebburn area.⁴⁸ However, there may have been ex-Communists, still favourable to the CP, controlling Jarrow LP&TC. This is quite possible given that the mayor

⁴⁰ *Shields Gazette*, 31/3/37, p5 and *North Mail*, 31/3/37, p7

⁴¹ *North Mail*, 30/4/37, p4

⁴² *Shields Gazette*, 18/2/37, p1; 8/4/37, p1, *Sunday Sun*, 27/5/37, p11 and *North Mail*, 28/6/37, p3
JPLP members also attacked the 'fascism' of Jarrow Labour but this presumably referred to their methods rather than their political ideology.

⁴³ *Shields Gazette*, 29/6/37, p10

As seen in chapter one, Jarrow LP&TC claimed that it was not involved with Communists, neither did it have any Communist delegates on it.

⁴⁴ E. Wilkinson, *The Town That Was Murdered* (Left Book Club, Gollancz, 1939) p194

⁴⁵ Harry Clarke Interview, 5/2/99

The *Daily Worker* gave the game away. It had to announce that its description of Rounce as a Communist candidate in a previous edition was an 'error' and that Rounce was in fact a Labour candidate and not a CP member. The 'error' was that Rounce's true political affiliation had been published in a national daily.

Daily Worker, 24/1/38, p5

⁴⁶ J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *Britain in the Depression. Society and Politics, 1929-1939* (Longman, Harlow, 2nd. edition, 1994) p153 and J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982) p229

⁴⁷ Harry Clarke Interview, 5/2/99

Clarke ascribed the low membership of the Jarrow CP to the large Irish-Catholic element in Jarrow, to which atheist Communism was anathema. Newton did not mention this in his study of the sociology of Communism. Instead, he attributed the CP's poor following in depressed areas such as Jarrow to a more conservative political culture. Jarrow was an extreme case of the weakness of the CP in the north east due to the heavy Catholic presence (see chapter three).

K. Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism* (Allen Lane, 1969) p36

made a point in his statement of recognising that some Jarrow LP&TC members may have been Communists in the past. Evidence reinforcing this contention is that Jarrow LP&TC supported several Communist causes in the late thirties as it called for the rescinding of the Black Circular, supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938 and the Cripps Petition Campaign in 1939 (see chapters four, five and six).⁴⁹

There were signs in late August 1937 that the split between Jarrow LP&TC and the rebels was beginning to heal as three JPLP councillors, Mrs Scott, Hanlon and Riley, were readmitted to the Labour Party, and Riley was recognised as an official Labour Durham county councillor. Riley's chief reason for returning was that he believed it was essential to reunite if the party wanted to keep its majority. Scott explained that she had resigned from the Labour Party as a protest, but she bore no grudge against it and did not support JPLP attacks on individual party members. In council meetings after this time some of the bitterest exchanges were between those JPLP members who had returned to the Labour fold and those who had not.⁵⁰

However, this was not the end of the matter. Those left in JPLP decided to make their small organisation more potent by affiliating to the ILP. In early September 1937, ILP speakers were invited to address a meeting in Jarrow to outline their case. In the November 1937 municipal elections, the newly created ILP stood three candidates against Labour and Moderate opposition. The election was a disaster for the ILP as all three candidates were beaten into third place by Labour. One of these three was the incumbent Hopper, who had been expected to retain the seat. The net result was one Labour gain from the ILP, so that the new council saw Labour and Moderates tied with thirteen councillors each, with the two ILP councillors holding the balance of power.⁵¹

The united front in Jarrow now seemed even more of a pipe dream. Only ten days after the elections, the ILP showed that they were prepared to use their position to frustrate the Labour Party by voting against the Labour mayoral nominee. The Moderate nominee was voted mayor with ILP votes and this caused a 'scene' in Jarrow council. Jarrow Labour Party retaliated with allegations that the ILP had struck a deal with Moderates: their votes for the

⁴⁸ S. Mason letter to TUC, 14/1/36 (WMRC, 292/777.1/11)

⁴⁹ In fact, one of the rebels (Joe Symonds) may have been a reformed Communist as he stood for Jarrow council in 1926 as an NUWM candidate. He would have been an unusual Catholic had this been the case. F. Ennis, 'The Jarrow March of 1936: The Symbolic Expression of the Protest', M.A. Thesis, University of Durham (1982) p107

⁵⁰ *North Mail*, 30/7/37, p7; 6/8/37, p3; 29/9/37, p7; *Shields Gazette*, 5/8/37, p2; 6/8/37, p1; 21/8/37, p3 and 29/9/37, p1

⁵¹ *Shields Gazette*, 10/9/37, p6; 15/10/37, p1; 16/10/37, p1; 22/10/37, p1; 2/11/37, p1 and *New Leader*, 22/10/37, p6

mayor in return for Moderate votes in the council committee elections. The ILP denied this, stating that they simply did not like the Labour mayoral candidate. Whether there had been an agreement or not, the ILP members managed to retain the chair in certain committees. So hostile were the ILP to Labour that the national ILP was unhappy with the behaviour of their Jarrow branch. The mayoral imbroglio was brought to the attention of the NAC and the ILP North East Divisional Council agreed to send a representative to Jarrow to enquire into the situation.⁵² Another aspect of damage the situation caused to the idea of a united front was the CP's attempt to make political capital out of the situation. Outlining this incident, the *Daily Worker* commented: 'Once again, the ILP has struck a blow against the working class'.⁵³

The bitter controversy surrounding the mayoral election marked the apogee of divisions on the Jarrow left. In December 1937, a two-hour council debate on the proposed Jarrow steelworks was 'marked by its freedom from party quarrels'.⁵⁴ The ILP still stood a candidate against Labour in a by-election one week later. However, the result was not affected by a split in the working class vote as the Labour candidate secured a large overall majority against the ILP and Moderate challenge.⁵⁵ The ILP's control of the balance of power was further weakened by the re-admission to the Labour Party of an Independent who had been expelled in 1934. This freed Labour from their reliance on ILP support and made the mayor 'dictator' in the council, though conflict did not end completely. In February 1938, there was division over an ILP plan to march to Newcastle to interview the UAB district officer. The plan was torpedoed when only the two ILP councillors voted for it. The *New Leader* commented that this revealed the eighteen voting against the resolution had 'come to form the new United Front - Labour, plus Liberals, plus "Independents"'. No comment'.⁵⁶ Still, Labour had a change of heart two weeks later and decided to organise the march to Newcastle. The ILP welcomed the move but remained critical of Labour, pointing out that a committee appointed to report back would mean delaying the march for three months unless a special Labour Party meeting was called.⁵⁷

In March 1938 it seemed that Jarrow ILP was to become a permanent force in the town. The branch was hoping to make an impact with ILP MP speakers at a large meeting. However, this proved to be a false dawn as only three months later Jarrow ILP branch was

⁵² ILP NAC Minutes, 11&12/12/37 (BLPES, ILP3/25), *North Mail*, 10/11/37, p1; 13/11/37, p7; 15/11/37, p3; 17/11/37, p1; 20/11/37, p9; *Sunday Sun*, 14/11/37, p13; *Shields Gazette*, 10/11/37, p4; 15/11/37, p3; 19/11/37, p8 and 20/11/37, p4

⁵³ *Daily Worker*, 15/11/37, p3

⁵⁴ *North Mail*, 1/12/37, p5

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 7/12/37, p3; 10/12/37, p9; 11/12/37, p11 and *New Leader*, 17/12/37, p3

⁵⁶ *New Leader*, 4/2/38, p3

being wound up. Like Riley and Hanlon before them, the remaining two councillors and other members had decided that there was no room in Jarrow for two left parties.⁵⁸ Due to diminishing interest in the party and increasing difficulties, they decided to wind up the branch with the expiration of their branch office lease. This decision was not surprising. The ILP had not been able to secure a significant enough following even to retain its most popular councillor, Hopper, on Jarrow council. Although the ILP had held the balance of power on the council it had been able to do nothing more than frustrate the Labour mayoral candidate in 1937, whilst its members had been excluded from committees and been forced to co-operate with, or at least receive votes from, the Moderates. Had the three 'rebels' who returned to the Labour Party in August 1937 decided to remain with the ILP, it is conceivable that it would have had more success. However, they decided that Jarrow was too small for two Labour Parties and the remaining members of the ILP were forced to agree with them almost a year later. Throughout the entire course of the Unity Campaign and for almost a year after, the Jarrow labour movement was involved in an often dirty internal feud which brought it no benefits. It was not until August 1938, when all the rebels had been readmitted to the Labour Party, that the almost two year split began to be healed.⁵⁹ Obviously, issues around the need for working class unity had not figured in the minds of labour movement activists in Jarrow.

The Significance of Internal Divisions

Internal divisions were bound to occur in areas where one party was dominant. Margaret Gibb, a north east Labour organiser at the time, later mentioned the Labour domination of many north east councils and commented: 'so then we must make division amongst ourselves, alas! How worthwhile is a really good minority group!'⁶⁰ In many places the Labour Party was not seriously affected by these splits. The Durham County Council fissures were not serious as the party remained dominant.⁶¹ The same was true for many of the UDCs. Blaydon UDC, for example, had no Moderate representative on it at all before the election, so Labour's loss of six seats to them did not signify the loss of control of the council. Yet even if the division in the Labour vote did not precipitate defeat for the Labour candidate,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 18/2/38, p2

⁵⁸ *Shields Gazette*, 18/3/38, p8; 1/6/38, p4; *North Mail*, 25/5/38, p7 and 1/6/38, p5

⁵⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 2/7/38, p3; 26/7/38, p5; *North Mail*, 25/8/38, p5 and 14/6/38, p7

⁶⁰ M.H. Gibb & M. Callcott, 'The Labour Party in the North East Between the Wars', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.8 (1974) p13

Another problem stemming from this domination was nepotism. Though South Shields Labour Party only controlled the council fully from November 1937, as early as the end of December 1937 the party secretary felt the need to attack the nepotism which had 'intensified' since they had achieved municipal power.

South Shields LP&TC Minutes, 21/12/37 (SSPL, LPM5)

⁶¹ The Labour Party won control of Durham County Council in 1919, lost it in 1922, regained it in 1925 and controlled it subsequently.

the appearance of divisions in Labour ranks must have had a damaging effect on the party at the polls. There is evidence that local Labour Parties were aware of this problem. In May 1937, for example, Durham DLP wished to find 'ways and means' of stopping the 'growing evil' of Labour Party members attacking each other in the press.⁶²

However, Labour did not dominate every council where the party was divided in the late thirties. Before the election, Bedlington council had hung in the balance, as both Labour and Independents had nine members each. After the election, the Independents took control due to the split. Likewise, the squabbling at Consett helped the ruling Moderates. After the election, the Moderates had seventeen members to Labour's ten. Labour in Gateshead could not afford to bicker amongst themselves if they wished to hold onto municipal power. Labour took control of Gateshead council in 1935 and two Moderate gains in 1936 tied the parties. Labour only remained in power with the casting vote of the mayor. There was no change at the 1937 elections, but the defection of a Labour alderman to the Moderates in February 1938 snatched control from Labour's hands.⁶³ At Jarrow, the Labour rebels held the balance of power and the later ILP councillors, even though only numbering two, could and did frustrate Labour plans on the council. The salient point here is that regardless of whether the control of a council was in jeopardy or not, there were destructive divisions within the official labour movement.

Many within the official labour movement did not appear to desire internal unity in this period, when external events, particularly on the international scene, could reasonably have been expected to bring them together to face the threat. The catalogue of conflict within the official labour movement in the region suggests an introverted and somewhat complacent movement, one that included a significant number who did not look beyond local politics and their own position within it to the national political scene, let alone the international one.⁶⁴ (Or perhaps labour movement activists simply saw no link at all between their actions and those of

⁶¹ M.H. Gibb & M. Callcott, op cit., p13

⁶² Durham DLP Minutes, 22/5/37 (DRO, D/SHO/93/2) and *North Mail*, 6/4/37, p9

⁶³ With one gain in November 1938, Labour re-took control.

Evening Chronicle, 2/11/35, p4; 2/11/36, p7; *North Mail*, 6/4/37, p7; 12/10/37, p5; 2/11/37, p1; 2/11/38, p9 and Newspaper Cuttings, 1936-38, 8/2/38, p159 (GPL, L908.9)

⁶⁴ Rowe stated that the whole region 'closed in' with the end of population growth after about 1910 and that outward migration from 1920 did nothing to break down the north east's insularity.

D.J. Rowe, op cit., pp435-6

Discussing the north east ruling elite, McCord pointed out that their economic links with the rest of Britain and abroad were sufficient to limit 'any myopic restrictions in outlook within the more powerful elements in north eastern society'. Unfortunately, McCord did not discuss the attitudes of working class north easterners, but this comment suggests that he was attempting to defend the rich from an accusation that was made of the region's populace. Implicitly, then, he accepted that it was true of the region's poor.

N. McCord, op cit., p106

their national leaders). Either way, this evidence suggests the continued importance of the 'local' and 'regional' in the north east, and that many in the region remained relatively resistant to the 'undeniable trend towards the nationalisation of British political life'.⁶⁵ Thus Joan Smith's claim that it was not until the late 1920s/1930s that local differences in Britain were 'overwhelmed by a new "common-sense" and "folklore" that was nationally constructed' appears to be a little early to apply to the north east.⁶⁶

However, it would be wrong to overstate this characteristic, which was not, of course, peculiar to the north east.⁶⁷ As will be seen, sections of the north east labour movement were very active on issues such as Spain, revealing a strong awareness of the national and international arenas. Strangely, Newcastle TC could be embroiled in a parochial and petty dispute with Gateshead LP&TC, which reflected local animosities, at the same time as being involved in a large amount of left wing activity which demanded a high level of political awareness and commitment. In fact the other protagonist, Gateshead LP&TC, was also involved in much of this activity. Thus the evidence in this chapter offers only another part of the explanation for why there was so little united front activity in the north east in 1936. The official movement was too busy arguing within itself to attempt co-operation with external left organisations. A party so given to internal disputes at local and regional level would not be easily led into new strategies such as the united or popular front. Either the national leadership would have to take a firm initiative on the issue (which was of course not going to happen in the cases of the united and popular fronts) or there would have to be a strong desire in the rank-and-file for unity with other parties which manifested itself in grass roots activity. Another aspect of internal disunity depended on the attitudes of labour movement Catholics to their party's policy on the Spanish civil war. The next chapter will discuss the attitudes of labour movement Catholics who represented another potential barrier to association with Communists.

⁶⁵ S. Berger, 'The Decline of Liberalism and the Rise of Labour: The Regional Approach', *Parliamentary History*, Vol.12, No.1 (1993) p86

See also R.W. Johnson, 'The Nationalisation of English Rural Politics; Norfolk South West, 1945-1970', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol.26, No.1 (1972-3) pp8-55

⁶⁶ Smith claimed that before the Great War Britain was 'still a "local" society in the sense that each conurbation's industrial and social structure could have a profound influence on the political life of the town'. J. Smith, 'Labour Tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.17 (1984) p44

⁶⁷ For example, Murphy claimed that Leeds TC was an unfruitful ground for the CP as it had parochial rather than international concerns. When it did declare on international topics, it invariably followed the national Labour Party.

D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p242

CHAPTER THREE

Dissension Over Spain: Catholics and Communism

One of the major reasons why so many British labour movement leaders were reluctant to support the Spanish Republic was for fear of alienating their Catholic members. Despite the lukewarm stance many took on the issue, there was still some division within the official movement as Catholics made their opposition to Labour's support of the Republic clear. The attitude of the Catholic Church was particularly important in the north east as, in England, only Lancashire had a higher proportion of Catholics in its population.¹ Controversy within the labour movement over its attitude to the Spanish civil war occurred in the north east. This chapter will discuss the extent and nature of this controversy and the extent to which it divided and damaged the official labour movement.² It will then assess the implications of this for the success of the united and popular fronts.

The Catholic Church's Attitude and Potential Influence in the North East

Anti-Communism was a fundamental aspect of Catholicism, and the views of the north east Catholic Church hierarchy were in no doubt. At the end of August 1936, presumably in response to the Communist campaign for affiliation to Labour, Bishop Joseph Thorman of Hexham and Newcastle diocese put his name to an open letter from the Catholic Social Guild, of which he was president, to the *Universe* (a Catholic newspaper).³ The letter stated that socialists must not become Communist 'otherwise there may soon be no room for Catholics in the Socialist Party and the experience of Spain will be shared by British Catholics'.⁴ This meant

¹ D.J. Rowe, 'The North East', in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume One. Regions and Communities* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990) p468. In 1928 it was estimated that 12% of Tyneside's population was Catholic (and therefore of likely Irish origin). A more recent estimate came from David Byrne who calculated that in 1931 those descended from Irish immigrants would have constituted about 20% of the north east's population, which corresponded well with the proportion of children in Catholic schools in 1996.

F. Ennis, 'The Jarrow March of 1936: The Symbolic Expression of the Protest', M.A. Thesis, University of Durham (1982) p85 and D. Byrne, 'Immigrants and the Formation of the North Eastern Industrial Working Class', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.30 (1996) p34. In 1937 there were approximately 230,400 Catholics in the Diocese of Hexham and Newcastle and 329 priests. *Newcastle Journal*, 7/1/37, p9

² Unfortunately, there is little of use for this particular study in the Diocesan archives. They contain hardly any papers of Bishop Thorman (1925-1936) nor of Bishop McCormack (1937-1958).

³ In 1938 there were 55 Catholic Social Guild study clubs in the north east counties. This compares to 46 in Scotland, 45 in Yorkshire and 73 in Lancashire. Thorman was president for 40 years. J.M. Cleary, *Catholic Social Action in Britain 1909-1959. A History of the Catholic Social Guild* (Oxford Catholic Social Guild, Oxford, 1961) pp141 and 154

⁴ *North Mail*, 31/8/36, p2

See also *Durham County Advertiser*, 4/9/36, p3 and J.E. Keating, 'Roman Catholics, Christian Democracy and the British Labour Movement 1910-1960', Ph.D. Thesis, Manchester University (1992) p112

that Catholics, who presently played an important part in the Labour Party, would leave if Communists captured the party leadership. If Catholics were to remain true to their religion they would have to be implacably hostile to Communists and their united front proposals.

Like Catholic clergy elsewhere, prominent Catholics in the north east came out strongly against the Spanish Republic. The deaths of clergy and church burnings in the Republican zone provided the Catholic Church with ammunition against atheist Communism. In September 1936 Thorman wrote to all the churches in his diocese, instructing priests to say prayers about the situation in Spain: 'No one can remain indifferent [to] the cruel murder of priests and nuns and the persecution of the faithful [...] the minds of men have been poisoned by atheism'.⁵ In the same month, the Tyneside branch of the Catholic Social Guild held a meeting on Spain at which the League of Nations Union (LNU) executive member and Catholic, John Eppstein, claimed that the situation in Spain was caused by the twin evils of totalitarianism and Communism.⁶ The Catholic Church in the north east disseminated anti-Republic propaganda in subsequent years. In March 1937, Tyneside branch of the Catholic Truth Society held a public meeting at Newcastle City Hall on the subject. A Barcelona priest told the audience of 1,500 that 16 million of the 22 million in Spain supported Franco whilst an English journalist depicted the conflict as one between Christianity (Franco) and atheism (the Republic).⁷ Back from Spain on a propaganda tour in April 1937, the International Brigade member Frank Graham addressed a meeting at Shotton colliery that coincided with a thousand-strong Catholic Young Men's Society rally at which some spoke in favour of Franco.⁸ In July 1938, J.H. Ashington withdrew his children from Roman Catholic school because prayers were 'being offered up daily for the success of Franco'.⁹

Theoretically, Catholic propaganda influenced the political attitudes of Catholic congregations. Pauline Lynn claimed that the Catholic Church had 'enormous power' in north east towns with large Catholic populations: 'evidence suggests that [...] the priest would dispense political advice from the pulpit whilst his parishioners feared eternal damnation if they

⁵ *North Mail*, 21/9/36, p3

⁶ Presumably he felt that these two forces were both at work on the Republican side. This meeting contradicts Cleary's claim that the Catholic Social Guild took a detached view of fascism and especially of Franco. *Newcastle Journal*, 7/9/36, p9 and J.M. Cleary, op cit., p165

Eppstein was an active Catholic layman and became assistant secretary of the LNU. A month after this speech, he threatened to resign over the LNU's support for the Spanish Republic. Eventually he did resign over the issue.

D.S. Birn, *The League of Nations Union, 1918-45* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981) p188 and J.E. Keating, op cit., pp114-117

⁷ *North Mail*, 23/3/37, p7

⁸ *Durham Chronicle*, 7/5/37, pp5 and 12 and F. Graham, *The Battle of Jarama* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1987) p27

⁹ *North Mail*, 5/7/38, p6

ignored his directive'.¹⁰ Lynn also noted that influence was particularly strong with female Catholics through the Catholic Women's League. In this organisation women were subject to overt attempts to secure their affiliation to the Conservative Party. Lynn's claims were supported by a Jarrow 'Catholic Informant' who said 'his instructions for voting were given from the pulpit of St. Bede's church'.¹¹ Presumably thanks to Catholic propaganda, there was some protest at the labour movement's attitude towards Spain, despite its support of the Republic being muted and equivocal.¹² For example, in late September 1936, Tyneside Catholic Teachers' Association expressed its 'horror at the frightful atrocities committed against religion in Spain'.¹³

Overt Catholic Labour Movement Opposition to Labour's Spanish Policy

In the north east, the most significant internal controversy regarding Catholics and policy towards Spain that emerged into the public arena was on the industrial side of the labour movement. Here, conflict came when prominent Catholic trade unionists reacted to a proposed policy statement. At a North East Federation of Trades Councils (NEFTC) delegate meeting in early September 1936 a resolution opposing non-intervention in Spain and urging the TUC to support the Republic was moved by the president of Newcastle TC, Tom Aisbitt. Councillor Norman McCretton of Gateshead LP&TC retaliated, attempting to move an amendment that the NEFTC should endorse the NCL policy of support for non-intervention and ask the Spanish government to protest against the burning of churches and other excesses. McCretton was, as both secretary of the NEFTC and chairperson of Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties, a significant regional activist. Edward Colgan (secretary of Blaydon TC) seconded his amendment but it was defeated by a large majority.¹⁴

In mid-October 1936, Newcastle TC struck back with a resolution which viewed the Catholic press' attitude towards the Republican government with 'disgust' and called upon Catholic trade unionists 'openly to repudiate the activities of these fascist supporters under the guise of religion'.¹⁵ The response of the Catholic delegates was swift and predictable. McCretton said that Catholic trade unionists took 'very strong exception' to this 'gratuitous

¹⁰ P. Lynn, 'The Impact of Women. The Shaping of Political Allegiance in County Durham 1918-1945', *The Local Historian*, Vol.23 No.3 (1998) p167

¹¹ F. Ennis., *op cit.*, p96

¹² Two important Conservatives in the region, Alfred Denville MP (Newcastle Central) and Sir Nicholas Grattan-Doyle MP (Newcastle North) were Catholics and overt Franco supporters (see chapter seven).

¹³ *Evening Chronicle*, 25/9/36, p11

This was quite a large organisation. In December 1938 there were 200 members of the Tyneside Catholic Teachers' Association, in addition to 90 other delegates, present at the 26th Annual Conference of the Catholic Teacher's Federation held at Newcastle.

North Mail, 28/12/38, p7

¹⁴ *Newcastle Journal*, 9/9/36, p4

impertinence'.¹⁶ 'As Catholics', he continued, 'we have nothing to do with the political crisis in Spain, but we are deeply concerned with the attack upon our Church'.¹⁷ Newcastle TC, he warned, 'would be wise to permit Catholics to decide individually their attitude towards the unfortunate troubles in Spain'.¹⁸ McCretton's stand drew support from the Catholic Transport Guild of Hexham and Newcastle Diocese. Representing 230 Catholic trade unionists, it expressed resentment at 'the offensive, unwarrantable and presumptuous' Newcastle TC resolution.¹⁹ In the letters page of the *Sunday Sun*, another Catholic argued that they could choose their politics, except of course Communism, and asked by what authority Newcastle TC spoke for the working class.²⁰

Undeterred by this trenchant response, Aisbitt replied to McCretton's statements in the *Sunday Sun*, quoting Roman Catholic sources revealing that the Catholic Church expected its adherents to put its teachings before political principle. Aisbitt claimed that Newcastle TC was not 'presuming to instruct Catholics on matters of religion, but it is [...] opposing enemies of the movement' and challenged McCretton to a public debate on the matter.²¹ Then Newcastle TC went a step further, attempting to have McCretton expelled at a NEFTC meeting in late October 1936. The attempt failed, as, after 'heated discussion', it was resolved that the NEFTC 'greatly regrets that questions of religious beliefs should be made a matter for trade union controversy' and agreed that 'no useful purpose can be served' by pursuing the matter further.²² McCretton's warning that his expulsion might develop into a 'heresy hunt' in other trade unions in the district had won majority support. This effectively settled the matter and the NEFTC was not involved in another Catholic dispute for sixteen months. When controversy later arose over Catholic guilds, attitudes within the labour movement towards the Spanish civil war were not directly implicated, although it is likely that the experience of late 1936 figured in the minds of those involved (see below).

Apart from this high-level controversy, evidence of north east Catholic rank-and-file opposition to TUC funds being used to support the Republic is hard to come by. At the 1937 Union of Post Office Workers conference, a delegate of Newcastle No. 1 branch asserted his right to object to funds being subscribed to a cause that was opposed to his religion (i.e. the Spanish Republic). It became immediately clear, though, that he did not speak for all his co-

¹⁵ *Evening Chronicle*, 9/10/36, p6

¹⁶ *Evening Chronicle*, 10/10/36, p1; *Sunday Sun*, 11/10/36, p13 and *North Mail*, 12/10/36, p9

¹⁷ *Ibid.*,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*,

¹⁹ *Evening Chronicle*, 18/11/36, p5

²⁰ *Sunday Sun*, 25/10/36, p15

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18/10/36, p15

religionists from the region. Another north east Catholic, H. Clayton, challenged him, noting that his fellow Catholics were 'easily stampeded when the clergy cracked the whip'.²³ He then distinguished between hostility towards the Catholic clergy and Catholicism itself in Spain.

There was very little evidence of Catholic trade unionist opposition to trade union financial support for the Spanish Republic in the letters pages of the regional press. In fact, not only did working class Catholics generally not go on the offensive over the labour movement's attitude, they did not even respond to attacks from non-Catholics in the labour movement. At the same time as Aisbitt was embroiled in the NEFTC controversy with McCretton, he was conducting a letter-writing campaign in the *Sunday Sun* attacking the pernicious role of Catholics in the labour movement. This continued even after the controversy in the NEFTC had ended. A significant aspect of Aisbitt's correspondence was that very few Catholics responded to his allegations about their religion. Moreover, the vast majority of correspondents who defended Catholicism were either not from the north east or not obviously trade unionists: J. Brandon, for example, admitted he was neither a trade unionist nor a member of a political party.²⁴ In fact, only two correspondents in the *Sunday Sun* debate were north east trade unionists. 'RB', a member of Newcastle NUT, merely pointed out that the only privilege Catholics in his union asked was to teach their own religion in their own schools. There was nothing revealing particular offence at Aisbitt's remarks, or the attitude of the Labour Party as a whole towards the Spanish conflict.²⁵ The other correspondent, William Gowland of Findon lodge (Durham), was more aggressive. He castigated Aisbitt's 'silly nonsense' and asserted that 'men of the T. Aisbitt type are the real enemies of trade unionism. [...] There are many good earnest Catholics [...] who must feel hurt and disgusted by the treatment inflicted on them by men of the Aisbitt type'.²⁶ Yet Gowland was just one person, and he made no reference at all to the conflict in Spain and the labour movements' attitude to it. The editor closed correspondence on the subject in the same edition and ended this part of the controversy.²⁷ Of course, it would be wrong to read too much into one debate in one

²² *Sunday Sun*, 25/10/36, p13 and *Newcastle Journal*, 26/10/36, p3

²³ T. Buchanan, 'Divided Loyalties: the Impact of the Spanish Civil War on Britain's Civil Service Unions 1936-1939', *Historical Research*, Vol.65, No.156 (1992) p104

²⁴ *Sunday Sun*, 8/11/36, p17; 15/11/36, p7; 22/11/36, p17; 13/12/36, p15; 20/12/36, p5 and 27/12/36, p8

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6/12/36, p15

²⁶ In the same edition, M. Hannan also defended the Jesuits and Joseph Pearson of Newcastle, stating that he was not a Communist, attacked the Catholic Church. Neither mentioned the conflict in Spain nor labour movement policy on it. Of course, space in letters pages was limited, but if those writing in were representative, then there seemed to be little working class Catholic disquiet at Labour's attitude to Spain in this paper. *Sunday Sun*, 10/1/37, p16

²⁷ With the controversy ended in the *Sunday Sun*, Aisbitt soon got involved in the *North Mail* debate (see below).

North Mail, 2/3/37, p6; 2/3/37, p6; 4/3/37, p6 and 6/3/37, p3

newspaper. There is no guarantee that this debate either reflected the views of the majority or the level of interest the issue stimulated in the region. However, examination of the discussion in the letters pages of other regional newspapers tends to support the argument that few Catholics were outraged by Aisbitt's anti-Catholic statements and actions, and those who were angered were generally not trade unionists or Labour voters.

There were certainly other regional newspaper controversies around the issue.²⁸ One was mentioned by the North East District delegate at a CP Central Committee meeting in November 1936. George Aitken was perturbed by the beginnings of a controversy in the *Evening Chronicle* precipitated by Newcastle TC passing its anti-Catholic resolution.²⁹ Yet it seems that Aitken was merely referring to the fact that the resolution was reported in the *Evening Chronicle*, as there was no evidence of wider argument stimulated by the report in the paper. There was, of course, debate in the letters page over the rights and wrongs of the Spanish conflict from the time it began, but Newcastle TC's action did not provide a new arena for conflict.³⁰ A few letters did express opposition to the labour movement aiding the Republic from people ostensibly involved in the movement, but these all came *before* the Newcastle TC controversy. In one edition of the paper, in August 1936, 'Trade Unionist' opposed the TUC granting money to the Republic when there was hunger in Britain whilst 'English Labour man' of Newcastle wrote; '[...] if Spain is to be saved from utter ruin, body and soul, the so-called rebel army must win, and the sooner the better for civilisation'.³¹ Yet these were exceptions. Most of those writing letters in these months were not immediately identifiable as working class Labour Party members or voters, let alone Catholics.³² For example, a C.H. Clayton, who thought that Labour 'has gone far enough in this matter by subscribing trade union funds without first consulting its thousands of Catholic members'.³³ In addition, many of the letters were not overtly critical or supportive of Labour policy, being more concerned with the

²⁸ There was no separate north east Catholic press after the *Tyneside Catholic News* was incorporated with the *Catholic Herald* in July 1934. Tom Buchanan, highlighting that it 'was in the interests of the Catholic press to publicise cases of workers' disaffection with Labour policy on Spain', used largely 'non-Catholic sources'. T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) p184

²⁹ Interestingly, Aitken mentioned Newcastle TC and then said 'we' passed a resolution against the Catholic secretary of the NEFTC. As Aisbitt was a Communist, 'we' was correct. CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

³⁰ Aitken's dislike of controversy over Catholicism was obviously not shared by his comrade Aisbitt who revelled in it.

Evening Chronicle, 27/7/36, p10; 31/7/36, p13; 31/8/36, p6; 1/9/36, p6; 3/9/36, p11; 8/9/36, p6; 2/11/36, p11; 5/11/36, p6 and 10/11/36, p6

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5/8/36, p9

³² Of course, those who were Catholics could also have been Labour Party members. But if they were, why did they not make their political affiliation explicit? Their case would have had much more influence on Labour leaders if their political loyalties were obvious.

general issues involved. Some Catholics, not necessarily from the labour movement, supported the Republic. For example, 'Catholic' claimed that the Spanish government was elected by the will of the people and was not a 'red front'.³⁴ Contrary to Aitken's claim, the 'controversy' in the *Evening Chronicle* suggested that the problem Catholics were posing in the north east labour movement over the issue of Spain was minimal.

Similar observations apply to the debates in other newspapers. In the *Shields News*, four Catholics wrote supporting the Republic but they were not obviously labour movement activists. 'RC Churchgoer' replied, arguing that if Franco's army did kill innocent women and children 'they at least respected the church' [sic.] and did not murder priests and nuns.³⁵ There was no indication that this person was a disgruntled Labour voter and, apart from this one exchange, there was no real debate over the question in the paper. There were several letters on the Spanish situation in the *North Mail*, the majority of them being anti-intervention, but there was no real debate about the actual Catholic issue. A few correspondents expressed opposition to Labour policy on Spain but this was generally not on religious grounds. Arguments against 'intervention' in Spain included that intervention would be helping Communism; that it would cause more problems than it solved and that it would give fascists an excuse for helping Franco. Of course, some did base their opposition to the Republic on religious grounds. There was an exchange of letters between 'Sim', an eye-witness, and 'LPC' of Sunderland who claimed church burning occurred in the Republican zone. 'Sim' replied that he was not a Catholic but that 99% of the Spanish population were and therefore Catholics must have done the church burning.³⁶ 'Blue' in Sunderland, saw the situation in Spain as Christianity against 'a murderous gang of rabid anti-Christians'.³⁷ 'Democritus' of Ashington argued that Russia repressed religion and 'reds' wanted to do the same in Spain.³⁸ However, in general there were surprisingly few mentions of religion, and none of these was obviously a disgruntled Catholic Labour Party member or trade unionist.

The only exchange in the *North Mail* with any bearing on working class Catholic attitudes was one sparked by a letter from George Harvey, who called on the NEC to establish a council of action and for all to participate to save Spain.³⁹ 'British Sailor' of Blyth, a 'Labour

³³ Ibid., 2/9/36, p6

³⁴ Ibid., 24/9/36, p6

³⁵ *Shields News*, 26/11/36, p4 and 24/11/36, p4

³⁶ *North Mail*, 8/8/36, p6 and 13/8/36, p6

³⁷ Ibid., 2/9/36, p6

³⁸ Ibid., 5/11/36, p7

³⁹ Ibid., 22/2/37, p6

man', replied that helping Russia in Spain was a 'sure way of breaking up the Labour Party'.⁴⁰ He thought that Russia was sending troops to Spain to destroy Christianity. Yet 'British Sailor', whilst concerned with religion, was not necessarily a Catholic. Secondly, he sounded like an odd 'Labour man', stating that 'I prefer having a German by my side, for Russians could never fight'.⁴¹ 'British Sailor' thought that the only way to achieve peace was for England and Germany to unite, hardly an orthodox Labour voter's viewpoint. In the *Newcastle Journal* there were no letters on the Spanish situation from obviously north east Catholics at all in the vital few months immediately after the outbreak of the conflict and the same can be said for the *Sunderland Echo*.

Wilf Jobling wrote an 'Open Letter to Christians of Blaydon' in September 1936 attempting to placate Catholic fears over labour movement policy.⁴² This letter also failed to provoke a response from disgruntled working class Catholics in the *Blaydon Courier*. To this letter and a Communist-organised meeting on Spain there was only one response; that of a non-Catholic. Whilst critical of Jobling's attitude, George Weatherstone still thought that the Catholic Church was responsible for causing 'dissension' in Spain.⁴³ Jobling and Steve Lawther's replies to Weatherstone also hardly mentioned the Catholic Church in Spain or Catholics at home.⁴⁴ In late August, 'Peace and Prosperity' criticised Blaydon UDC's support for the Republic and asked if councillors 'approve of the stripping naked of innocent priests and nuns, even burning them?'⁴⁵ Again, it was not clear that this was the protest of a Labour-voting Catholic. Similar observations hold for the other regional newspapers. Buchanan's claim, that working class Catholic dissent regarding Labour's policy on Spain declined over time as the memory of initial atrocities against the Catholic Church faded, was reflected in the north east. There was a general decline in the number and ferocity of letters in the regional press about the role of Catholicism in Spain after January 1937.⁴⁶

Presumably, had Catholic trade unionists been angry at the 'misuse' of union funds to aid the Republic, at least a handful would have put pen to paper and said so in no uncertain terms. As has been seen, working class advocates of the Republic certainly put their case in writing to the local papers. It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that there was very little

⁴⁰ Ibid., 24/2/37, p6

⁴¹ Ibid.,

⁴² Jobling 'earnestly' appealed 'to all religious-minded people of Blaydon' to examine the Spanish situation 'for themselves, calmly and soberly, and I believe that they will help us to avoid the danger of provoking disunity in the ranks of all lovers of Peace and Democracy'.

Blaydon Courier, 5/9/36, p8

⁴³ Ibid., 12/9/36, p8

⁴⁴ Ibid., 19/9/36, p5

⁴⁵ Ibid., 29/8/36, p8

evidence of Catholic trade unionist opposition to labour movement policy on Spain because it did not exist. Of course, newspapers' letters pages were limited in size and thus it is necessary to assume that the editor chose a representative sample of letters to publish. In fact, all the major regional newspapers were Liberal or Conservative supporters and tended to give particularly detailed coverage of splits within the labour movement.⁴⁷ Thus, if anything, Catholic labour movement criticism of their movement's attitude was more likely to have been included than excluded. Labour policy on the Republic seemed to have outraged few Catholics sufficiently to provoke them to protest in public, even to the extent of writing a letter to a newspaper.

Did North East Catholics Impede Labour Movement Activity in Support of the Republic?

There was very little evidence of publicly expressed working class Catholic opposition to labour movement policy on Spain. However, it is conceivable that Catholics opposed this policy but, instead of publicly denouncing it, placed covert pressure on their leaders to desist from organising pro-Republic activity. In some areas Catholics acted very directly to inhibit the labour movement's support of the Spanish Republic. For example, Catholic miners in Yorkshire struck in one pit in order to prevent part of their wages going to Spain (in the form of a MFGB grant) and Catholic trade unionists in one Birmingham constituency refused to pay their fees if Labour sympathised with the Republic.⁴⁸ Whilst there was no echo in the north east of these events (it is very likely that had there been a strike such as that in Yorkshire, it would have received press coverage), some evidence suggests that Catholics did attempt to impede labour movement support for the Republic. This evidence was provided by two Communists. George Aitken, at the November 1936 CP Central Committee meeting, claimed that in the north east Catholics had begun 'going to the trade unions in great numbers and to the local Labour Parties and opposing activity on the Spanish question [...]'.⁴⁹ Aitken criticised the tendency in the CP to 'completely ignore' the Catholic question and 'the enormous problem which it raises for us' and he called for the party to devise ways of combating the role of the Catholic Church.⁵⁰ The party leadership had failed, claimed Aitken, to deal with the problem and had not taken a lead on the issue. Charlie Woods later recalled that the 'divisive influence

⁴⁶ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, p184

⁴⁷ This was true even if the newspaper report was based on only the flimsiest of evidence, such as the report on the possible 'split' in Gateshead Labour Party mentioned below.

⁴⁸ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, pp191-2 and P.D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's Response to the Spanish Civil War With Particular Reference to the Labour Movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, Birmingham University (1977) p191

⁴⁹ CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

of Roman Catholicism' largely prompted opposition to 'Aid Spain' activities in the labour movement.⁵¹

However, apart from Wood's comment, there is no other evidence to corroborate Aitken's claim. As noted above, Aitken himself cited a non-existent controversy in the *Evening Chronicle* as the *only* evidence of this purported Catholic opposition. It is likely that Aitken was exaggerating for rhetorical effect: he needed ammunition to back up his criticisms of the party leadership which would have more impact if the situation was depicted as more serious than it in fact was. If Aitken had gleaned this inside information from someone like the bitterly anti-Catholic Aisbitt, this suggests another reason for the exaggeration. Aitken and Wood's un-corroborated claims are the only evidence that north east labour movement Catholics impeded Labour Party activity on Spain. All the other evidence suggests the opposite of this.

That Catholics were not a major impediment to the Republican cause is revealed by the evidence of labour movement solidarity campaigning in the region. Jarrow is particularly significant in this context as there was a high proportion of working class Catholic voters in Jarrow constituency.⁵² Despite this, Jarrow MP Ellen Wilkinson was a vigorous supporter of the Republic. Her attitude was not obviously muted or compromised by the demographics of her constituency. However, this is not to say that her attitude provoked no opposition from voters as there is evidence of some disquiet at her initial stance on the issue. In August 1936, 'Trade Unionist' criticised her for attending a meeting in Paris to find means of aiding the Spanish government: 'one would have thought Jarrow, in its present plight, to be a big enough handful'.⁵³ In September 1936, 'Not Fascist, Nazist [sic] or Communist' criticised her for visiting Spain in 1934 to support the Asturian miners who had rebelled against the government

⁵⁰ Ibid.,

⁵¹ Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18/2/85 (MML, Box B-4/M/1)

Unfortunately, it is now not possible to question Woods further about the precise nature of this opposition. Both Woods and Frank Graham noted that the Catholic Church were not involved in 'Aid Spain' activities, ignoring the major role the Catholic Church played in the housing of Basque refugee children (though admittedly one of the main Catholic motives here was to keep the refugees out of the hands of the 'reds').

Frank Graham Interview, 21/10/94

⁵² Irish Catholic immigrants came to Jarrow in the nineteenth century to work primarily as labourers at Palmer's Shipyard. They developed their own distinctive social, political and religious life in the town. Wilkinson attributed the large number of cases of TB in Jarrow to the Irish (and therefore Catholic) presence. She thought that the Irish were more susceptible to the disease.

E. Wilkinson, *The Town That Was Murdered* (Left Book Club, Gollancz, 1939) pp101-2 and 244

In 1932 approximately 10,000 of the 32,000 population of Jarrow were descendants of migrant groups and Jarrow became known as 'Little Ireland'.

H.A. Mess, *Industrial Tyneside. A Social Survey* (Ernest Benn, 1928) pp35, 135; F. Ennis, op cit., p85-86 and D.M. Jackson, "'Garibaldi or the Pope!' Newcastle's Irish Riot of 1866", *North East History*, Vol.34 (2001)

p58

⁵³ *Evening Chronicle*, 17/8/36, p6

and been brutally suppressed.⁵⁴ Yet, again, neither of these critics were necessarily Catholics. Moreover, there is little other evidence of annoyance at Wilkinson's attitude towards Spain in the early months of the conflict. Wilkinson continued to champion the Republic openly in subsequent years. At a Spain Campaign Committee meeting in Newcastle in December 1937, she refused to be cowed by pressure from Catholics. Brandishing a letter from the 'Catholic Action Party' warning her that they would be recording every word she said, Wilkinson countered; 'let not the church that stood by the Irish Republicans identify itself with fascism and death'.⁵⁵ This speech, 'Bede' (a newspaper columnist) noted, had 'apparently not increased her [Wilkinson's] popularity among the Catholic electors in the Jarrow division [the speech had] produced an uneasy feeling among a section of Miss Wilkinson's constituents who would like more light thrown on the subject'.⁵⁶ 'Bede' thought that Wilkinson should make the contents of the letter known. Yet this 'uneasy feeling' was manifest in one single letter to the press and even this did not attack Wilkinson's stance on Spain. Instead, 'A Jarrow Elector' attempted to refute her allegations about Catholics by claiming that the 'Catholic Action Committee [sic.]' did not exist and challenged Wilkinson to send the letter she had supposedly received to the *North Mail* editor to be verified. A week passed and Wilkinson failed to produce the letter. That was the end of the matter.⁵⁷

Wilkinson could behave in this relatively uncompromising manner because she did not arouse opposition within Jarrow DLP, despite its high proportion of Catholic members.⁵⁸ The split within Jarrow LP&TC from November 1936 appeared to be religion-based as three of the four 'rebels' who quit Labour were Catholics and rumoured to be establishing a 'Catholic

⁵⁴ Ibid., 12/9/36, p8

⁵⁵ Wilkinson did say that the letter by no means represented all Catholics as 'Influential members have begged me to ignore the actions of this irresponsible section'.

Shields Gazette, 13/12/37, p1; *North Mail*, 13/12/37, p7 and *Durham Chronicle*, 17/12/37, p18

⁵⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 17/12/37, p6

As argued below, Jarrow Labour Party did not suffer at the municipal polls either.

⁵⁷ *North Mail*, 15/12/37, p6 and 23/12/37, p6

⁵⁸ The fact that Sam Rowan, who was working for Jarrow council in 1936, mistook the 'Catholic Party' for the Labour Party, which he claimed did not exist in the town, graphically illustrates the strength of Catholics in the Jarrow labour movement. Rowan's recollections are also an example of why the testament of contemporaries has to be treated carefully. However, even in Jarrow it is unlikely that Catholics were in the majority. If Catholic membership of Labour reflected their representation in the general population, they would have constituted about one third of the party (see below).

J. McGurn & R. Poole, *Tyneside Memories* (Word of Mouth Publications, York, 1996) p37

Jarrow politics in the twenties was dominated by people elected on Catholic tickets. Labour was inactive electorally in Jarrow 1921-8, only standing 15 candidates out of a possible 48 contests. Labour's breakthrough came in the 1929 elections when Labour Catholics won three seats, defeating Catholic candidates. The defeat of the local Catholic canon by D.F. Riley at the 1934 County Council elections by 21 votes marked the end of overt Catholic participation in local politics.

F. Ennis, op cit., pp93, 104 and 108

For details of the earlier history of Labour in Jarrow see A.W. Purdue, 'Jarrow Politics, 1885-1914: The Challenge to Liberal Hegemony', *Northern History*, Vol.17 (1982) pp182-198

Party'.⁵⁹ Yet this was explicitly denied by one of the Catholic rebels who said: 'Politically I am a Socialist. I shall remain a Socialist'.⁶⁰ Furthermore, this split had nothing to do with Catholic dissent about their MP's stance on the Spanish civil war. As noted in chapter two, the rift emerged over the behaviour of some Labour Party members during the Jarrow march. The rebels did make allegations about the 'Communists' who controlled Jarrow LP&TC, but these remained unproved. Thus, the situation in Jarrow was in no way comparable to that in the Camberwell Labour Party, from which Catholic members formed a breakaway 'Constitutional Labour Party' over the issue of Labour's support for the Republic.⁶¹

That at least one Catholic Jarrow Labour Party member strongly supported the Spanish Republic is demonstrated by a curious newspaper report in late December 1936. Councillor D.F. Riley (one of the four Labour 'rebels') announced that he planned to raise an army of 10,000 and take it to fight for the Spanish Republic. 'Although I am a Catholic', Riley explained, 'I feel that I must not shirk from fighting Catholics who are against the Spanish Government'.⁶² Riley (from whom emanated most of the allegations about Jarrow LP&TC being controlled by Communists), justified his attitude as the Republican government was 'based on democratic principles and not on atheism or any form of dictatorship'.⁶³ Although the highly ambitious plan came to nothing (Riley himself certainly did not go to Spain) this incident is illustrative of the fact that some Labour Catholics were far from alienated by the stand of their party on this issue.⁶⁴ In fact, Riley favoured a far more pro-active approach than was countenanced by Labour leaders.⁶⁵ There is no indication that anyone either in Jarrow Labour Party or the 'rebel' camp was opposed to Ellen Wilkinson's high profile support for the Spanish Republic.

The evidence of the response of the Jarrow population to 'Aid Spain' is mixed. It seems that only one person from Jarrow, Thomas Atherton, volunteered for the International Brigade (IB).⁶⁶ In fact, 'popular folklore' has it that some Jarrow men volunteered to fight on

⁵⁹ Symonds, Scullion and Riley were Catholic, Hanlon was not.

F. Ennis., op cit., pp109 and 169

⁶⁰ *North Mail*, 13/1/37, p3

⁶¹ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, p175

⁶² *Shields Gazette*, 31/12/36, p1 and *Shields News*, 31/12/36, p1

⁶³ *Ibid.*,

⁶⁴ Although Riley was not technically a member of the Labour Party at this time, he was the first to return to the Labour fold in August 1937.

⁶⁵ Some other north east Catholics expressed similar sentiments. 'Socialist RC', a 'Catholic mother' married to a 'Red' was 'proud' of his CP membership: 'More than 400 of his party comrades have died in Spain, fighting alongside Catholics in defence of liberty and justice'.

Shields Gazette, 25/10/37, p4

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 2/4/38, p1

Franco's side in Spain, although there appears to be no documentary evidence of this.⁶⁷ Irrespective of this, the fact that only one person fought in the IB can perhaps be explained by the small size of the local Communist Party (see chapter two). The CP organised prospective volunteers and those who were not CP members generally had a link with someone who was. With so few in Jarrow and Hebburn CP, it was perhaps more difficult to build up the contacts necessary for volunteering. There was also no Jarrow Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC), which could be explained by Catholic opposition to the idea. Yet a more likely explanation is that Wilkinson and Jarrow DLP were so active on the issue that it was not deemed necessary.⁶⁸ For example, Jarrow Labour Party and unemployed men made house-to-house collections for Spanish relief in 1937 and Wilkinson's agent Harry Stoddart was responsible for administering the Spanish Milk Fund in the area as well as helping organise Spain Campaign Committee meetings. As SMACs in other localities were entirely Labour Party affairs, perhaps Jarrow Labour thought such a committee unnecessary.⁶⁹

Similarly, Gateshead had a large Catholic Labour-voting population and an important Catholic critic of Labour policy on Spain in the form of McCretton.⁷⁰ However, this did not prevent the party from providing active support for the Republic, from the formation of the Gateshead SMAC through to the Tyneside Foodship in 1939. Gateshead LP&TC generally emphasised the humanitarian aspect of the campaigns it conducted, perhaps in order to minimise offence to Catholics.⁷¹ Again like Jarrow, there was evidence of a possible split in Gateshead Labour Party over Catholicism in 1937 when a slightly cryptic set of newspaper reports on an alleged 'plot' appeared in the local press. A report into the internal workings of

⁶⁷ I am indebted to Catholic, formerly Wardley miner (near Jarrow) and historian Dave Douglass for this information.

⁶⁸ Of course, activity is a relative thing. Relative to other DLPs in the north east Jarrow was active on Spain. This was still not enough for young left wingers like Harry Clarke, however, who left the Labour Party partly over its inactivity on Spain.

Harry Clarke Interview, 5/2/99

⁶⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 17/7/37, p8; 19/7/37, p8; 21/7/37, p3; 23/11/37, p8; 13/12/37, p1; 17/12/37, p14; 18/2/38, p4; 28/10/38, p9; *North Mail*, 26/1/37, p2; 6/2/37, p4; 7/5/37, p6; 2/12/37, p7; 26/10/38, p7; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/36, p4 and *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 14/5/37, p3

⁷⁰ In 1861, 7.2% of Gateshead's population was Irish born. In 1931 the Catholic population of the town was estimated at 8-10,000 (11-14% of the 74,000 electorate), the majority of whom were expected to vote Labour. A conservative local paper noted that 'the Socialist candidate [...] if he happens to be a member of the Church of Rome he can count on much valuable aid'. North ward had a particularly strong Catholic vote. Newspaper Cuttings, 1931-33, pp92 and 121 (n.d.s) (GPL, L908.9); F.W.D. Manders, *A History of Gateshead* (Gateshead Corporation, Gateshead, 1973) pp277-285 and T.P. MacDermot, 'Irish Workers on Tyneside in the 19th Century', in N. McCord (ed.), *Essays in Tyneside Labour History* (Newcastle Polytechnic Department of Humanities, Newcastle, 1977) p159

⁷¹ For example, in May 1937 a Labour figure claimed that the campaign was 'definitely non-partisan and non-sectarian. We work voluntarily with one viewpoint ever before us - the need for this humanitarian relief work'. *North Mail*, 10/5/37, p6.

See also *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/36, p4; 2/37, p1; 3/37, p4 and *Newcastle Journal* 14/4/37, p4

the Gateshead Labour Party suggested that certain members were plotting against sitting councillors seeking re-election in November 1937. This report prompted a letter from a trade union branch threatening to withhold its affiliation fees until it was satisfied that the party was being run on a business footing. A heated meeting of the entire Gateshead Labour Party referred the matter to the executive, which decided to hold an inquiry. The 'plot' against certain councillors appeared to have been related to Catholics as one Labour member commented: 'I am afraid that the old question of religion may creep into this in which case it is more than likely that the party may split. Certainly if Roman Catholics are made the victim of any such intrigue [...] Labour will lose thousands of votes'.⁷² This was evidence of the internal divisions that could arise between Catholics and non-Catholics within the Labour Party. However, it is significant that this intrigue had nothing to do with the events in Spain as the feud was of nearly three years standing.⁷³ In fact, the threatened split did not occur. Unfortunately, as there are no other press reports, it is impossible to know how it was resolved. It is feasible that the whole story was merely a creation of the local press, though there was a history of splits involving Catholics in Gateshead Labour Party over certain issues. For example, in 1931, a strong Catholic group on the Gateshead council split the Labour group over the issue of supplying birth control advice.⁷⁴ Thus it appears that in the north east domestic issues relating to religion caused most labour movement Catholics far more problems than did the reported plight of their church abroad.

Other Labour Parties operating in Catholic areas were also not obviously hampered in their 'Aid Spain' activities. A Thornley branch resolution at Seaham DLP AGM committed the party to a campaign supporting the Republic, in another area with a notable Catholic population.⁷⁵ The campaign took the form of a 'Help Spain' week in late August 1937 that

⁷² *Sunday Sun*, 13/6/37, p1

⁷³ It had started at the November 1934 elections when an official Labour candidate beat a Moderate and an unofficial Labour candidate who was subsequently reconciled to Labour. The reasons for the conflict remained unexplained.

Sunday Sun, 13/6/37, p1; *North Mail*, 14/6/37, p7 and 15/6/37, p5

⁷⁴ Newspaper Cuttings, 1931-33, 1/6/31, p129 (GPL, L908.9)

The issue of birth control was divisive for Catholics in the labour movement throughout Britain. For example, in Liverpool some Labour Catholics were expelled over the issue.

See N. Riddell, 'The Catholic Church and the Labour Party, 1918-1931', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol.8, No.2 (1997) pp179-182 and J.E. Keating, p108

⁷⁵ *North Mail*, 31/5/37, p9

In 1923 there were 3,453 Catholics in a total population of 16,957 in the Seaham UDC area (i.e. over 20%). Ramsay Macdonald certainly appreciated the value of the Catholic vote in the constituency during and after his time in the Labour Party.

B.E. Naylor, 'Ramsay Macdonald and Seaham Labour Politics', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.15 (1981) p20 and P. Lynn, op cit., p167

included house-to-house collections and several public meetings.⁷⁶ As McCretton had failed to influence his party, so Colgan did not halt Blaydon Labour Party's considerable efforts for Republican Spain. It was only in Sunderland where the Labour Party was not particularly active in 'Aid Spain' work in an area with a large Catholic population.⁷⁷ The only high-profile Sunderland Labour Party members prominently involved in Sunderland SMAC were the Labour mayor, Summerbell, and his wife. This may have been due to internal pressure from Catholics, but this remains conjecture. Apart from Sunderland, many north east DLPs organised meetings on Spain and conducted their own fund raising campaigns for the Labour Party's International Solidarity Fund, which again suggests that there had been little Catholic impediment. Of course, this activity was stronger and longer-lived in some localities than others and it is conceivable that there might have been more activity had it not been for Catholic opposition. Equally, in localities where Labour organisation was moribund (such as Tynemouth and North Shields), it is just as likely that nothing more would have been done even if there not been these religious complicating factors. Though Catholics in the local parties did not obviously impede activity, it is possible that considerations about not wishing to alienate Catholics meant that much of the campaigning for Republican Spain was done on a humanitarian basis. However, the desire to not alienate middle class and others not favourable to the politics of the Spanish Republic was also important in this decision (see chapter eight).

The attitude of the only north east Catholic Labour MP, David Adams (Consett), is significant in this context. Tom Buchanan claimed that there were basically four different ways Catholic Labour MPs reacted to the Spanish civil war: to be outspoken in defence of the Republic; to be outspoken in defence of the Catholic Church and condemn the Republic (a rare reaction); to oppose the labour movement stance in coded terms or, the most common, quiescence.⁷⁸ Adams initially wavered between the first and final categories. He was the only Catholic Labour MP of eight approached who initially agreed to sign a letter penned by F. O'Hanlan, chairperson of Chichester DLP, which called upon Catholic bishops to denounce the

⁷⁶ *North Mail*, 27/8/37, p2; 30/8/37, p3; 31/8/37, p5 and 1/9/37, p7

⁷⁷ In 1861, 5.8% of Sunderland's population was Irish born. Labour defeat at the Sunderland by-election in April 1931 was attributed by the NEC to Catholic anger at the Education Bill. In the 1935 general election a Conservative instigated smear intended to discredit Labour candidate Leah Manning with Catholic voters before the election (by claiming that she had written sexually explicit books), was one cause of her subsequent defeat. The other Labour candidate in the two member constituency, George Catlin, was a Catholic himself. He received more votes than Manning though he attributed this to anti-female prejudice rather than religion. T.P. MacDermot, op cit., p159; N. Riddell, op cit., p187; J.E. Keating, op cit., pp217-218; A. Potts, 'Forty Years On. The Labour Party in Sunderland 1900-1945', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.24 (1990) pp12-17; M. Callcott & B. Nield, 'Leah Manning' in J. Bellamy & J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol.VII (1984) pp166-173 and N. Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) pp46-7

⁷⁸ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, pp189-90

Franco rebellion in early 1938. However Adams, wrote O'Hanlan to Middleton, 'writing from the north, promised to support it [the letter]. But after meeting his colleagues in the pious air of London, he seems to have abandoned his sinful intention'.⁷⁹ Yet, Adams changed his mind again and the final draft of the letter carried his signature. Following this, Adams became an increasingly overt supporter of the Republic. In March 1938 he called for the withdrawal of the Italian and German armies from Spain.⁸⁰ He was sufficiently supportive by 1939 to put his name to the North East International Brigade Memorial Fund appeal and he spoke at the IB memorial meeting in January 1939. Only three other north east Labour MPs (Wilkinson, Whitley and Ede) joined him in supporting the appeal. A week later he was on the platform again for the Tyneside Foodship campaign (see chapter eight).⁸¹ Of course, not all prominent Catholics in the north east Labour Party were overt Republican supporters. People such as McCretton and Colgan openly criticised Labour's attitude. Others were not obviously connected with the 'Aid Spain' campaigns but did not openly criticise their party's position either. This was the case, for example, for Wilfred Edge, an important Catholic Labour figure in Durham City.⁸²

Not only did most Catholics not appear to impede the activity of their Labour Parties on Spain, some donated to 'Aid Spain' funds. Ellen Wilkinson, for one, claimed this when responding to the 'Catholic Action Party' in December 1937.⁸³ Charlie Woods wrote that there were some 'bad' Catholics at 'grass roots level who gave their support' to campaigns for the Spanish Republic.⁸⁴ Additional evidence regarding individual Catholic support and involvement in 'Aid Spain' campaigns outside of the Basque refugees campaign is sparse, but some references in the regional press at the time of the Tyneside Foodship suggest that at least some Catholics supported the Republic.⁸⁵ For example, 'Love Thy Neighbour', claiming to be a Catholic, refused 'to allow my faith to blind my power of reason' and would give to the foodship even if Spanish women and children were atheists.⁸⁶ He/she added that other

⁷⁹ O'Hanlan letter, 15/1/38, O'Hanlan letter to Middleton, 6/2/38 and O'Hanlan's draft of the letter (MLHA, SCW/12/1i, SCW/12/2i and SCW/12/3)

⁸⁰ *Durham Chronicle*, 25/3/38, p6

⁸¹ *North Mail*, 23/1/39, p5; *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p7 and undated newspaper articles (MML, BoxB-7B/30 and BoxB-4M/5a)

⁸² Edge formed and was secretary of Durham TC and of NUGMW Durham No.1 branch. *North Mail* 4/8/38, p9 and *Durham Chronicle*, 5/8/38, p8

⁸³ *North Mail*, 13/12/37, p7

⁸⁴ Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4/M/1)

⁸⁵ The Catholic Church itself housed some Basque refugee children (see chapter eight).

⁸⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 24/1/39, p4

Catholics were not deluded by the 'fascist papers' and instead did as God wanted and ended by condemning Franco's 'unchristian outrages on innocent women and children'.⁸⁷

The behaviour of Catholic north east trade unionists just four years after this study ends is of key significance. In 1943, Colgan and others in Hexham and Newcastle diocese established the Association of Catholic Trades Unionists (ACTU) which grew into a national federation. Its creation was a response to the education policy accepted by the TUC in 1942, which implied the end of state-funded Catholic schools. By 1950 the ACTU had all but expired, but the north east was one of its strongholds while it existed.⁸⁸ This demonstrates that Catholics had the will to organise within the labour movement against its policies if they saw fit. The fact that they did not do this around Spain suggests that, as with the division caused by Catholics in Gateshead Labour Party in 1931 over birth control, domestic issues directly impacting on their lives were far more controversial than foreign policy issues such as the Spanish civil war. If there really had been widespread Catholic anger on the issue of Spain, there should be some evidence of it.

The attitudes of non-Catholics in the official labour movement are also illuminating. The NEFTC Spanish civil war controversy revealed that some non-Catholics were far from placatory to the sensibilities of their Catholic comrades. Tom Aisbitt, a high-profile member of Newcastle TC and also NEFTC president in 1938, was the most prominent 'Catholic-baiter' in the north east labour movement. Aisbitt conducted a campaign against Catholics (and their guilds) in letters to newspapers.⁸⁹ Whilst Aisbitt did not, after 1937, persist with his barrage of anti-Catholic letters in the regional press (partly, perhaps, because editors ended correspondence on the topic), he did maintain a steady campaign throughout the whole of the late thirties in the pages of the ASW (his union) journal. Even after the end of the Spanish civil war, Aisbitt was still writing pieces in the ASW journal on the pernicious role of religions, and especially Catholicism.⁹⁰ As a crypto-Communist, Aisbitt's behaviour is understandable. Presumably feeling persecuted himself, highlighting the tactics and behaviour of Catholics in the trade union movement was a way of deflecting interest from the activities of Communists.

Aisbitt was not the only significant labour movement activist to adopt this confrontational attitude. Another left winger who was favourable to the CP also went on the

⁸⁷ Ibid.,

In fact, 'Love Thy Neighbour' had gone further than the framers of the campaign themselves would go in depicting the foodship as a means of defeating Franco (see chapter eight).

⁸⁸ J.E. Keating, op cit., pp314-315 and 387-388 and J.M. Cleary, op cit., pp137-8

⁸⁹ *Sunday Sun*, 18/10/36, p15; 1/11/36, p15; 29/11/36, p17; 6/12/36, p15; 13/12/36, p15; 1/8/37, p16; *North Mail*, 2/3/37, p6 and 6/3/37, p3

⁹⁰ ASW Journal and Reports, 5/39, p391 (WMRC, 78/ASW/4/1/19)

offensive. In September 1936, Steve Lawther sparked controversy with his allegation that St. Joseph's Roman Catholic school near Blaydon had held prayers for a Franco victory. Lawther, refusing to believe the school's claim that the prayers were for both sides, argued that if educational institutions 'are going to be used for propaganda purposes to back up fascist aggression against the people of Spain, it is time as a committee we called a halt'.⁹¹ This alienated 'Catholic Miner' who wrote that Lawther 'should know a few facts. In Spain the issue is between Roman Catholic religion and Communist and Anarchist butchers'.⁹² However, this single letter was the only indication that working class Catholics had been angered by Lawther's stance.⁹³

Some non-Catholics did, of course, attempt to placate Catholic fears. Boldon Colliery Labour Party, for example, appealed to Christians, 'In view of the falseness of atrocity stories, which are got up by political sections in order to steal the Catholic vote', to attend a meeting on Spain to be addressed by an eye witness.⁹⁴ Aisbitt's outspoken anti-Catholic attitudes did not reflect those of other non-Catholics in the labour movement, nor were they seen as particularly outrageous or destructive. As 'Roman Catholic' of Sunderland pointed out in the *Sunday Sun* controversy, Aisbitt's anti-Catholic letters had not produced a 'single word of approval or protest from his comrades in the socialist movement', despite the size of this movement.⁹⁵ A month later, the same correspondent could not understand why 'head officials of the Socialist movement have not uttered one word of "protest" to a member whose actions are detrimental to the movement. The fact of their silence conveys to me that this sort of thing is countenanced'.⁹⁶ This inactivity either in support of or against Catholics suggests non-Catholic indifference to their presence within the north east labour movement. It seems that non-Catholic labour movement leaders in the region were not particularly bothered by those who chose to attack Catholics publicly. Had the situation been as serious as Aitken depicted in

⁹¹ *North Mail*, 17/9/36, p1 and *Newcastle Journal*, 17/9/36, p3

⁹² *Evening Chronicle*, 21/9/36, p10

⁹³ At a meeting of Blaydon and district education sub-committee, a letter from St Joseph's stated that, as the school had not received any complaints from parents, it could not act. It reasserted that pupils had been asked to pray for Catholics on both sides of the conflict, though Lawther still refused to believe this.

Blaydon Courier, 24/10/36, p8

⁹⁴ *Shields Gazette*, 11/9/36, p4

Communists, too, sometimes took a conciliatory approach. For example, Wilf Jobling's 'Open Letter to the Christians of Blaydon' mentioned above.

⁹⁵ *Sunday Sun*, 13/12/36, p15

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3/1/37, p13

Aisbitt's response to this question was 'Perhaps [...] larger numbers of workers are taking less interest in what Catholics say and more interest in what they do'. He then turned on another correspondent, Kelly, and the Jesuits.

Sunday Sun, 10/1/37, p16

autumn 1936, it is surely likely that Aisbitt and Lawther would have been silenced, disciplined or at least publicly rebuked for their public behaviour.

That the majority of north east labour movement leaders were prepared to follow the national leadership's now less conciliatory attitude and risk alienating their Catholic members was revealed in March 1938, when the NEFTC moved against Catholic guilds.⁹⁷ Presiding, Aisbitt read a letter from Citrine on groups established in the trade union movement for 'special interests'. He then argued that Catholics should be disciplined in the same way as Socialist League and CP members and proposed a resolution supporting TUC efforts to suppress Catholic guilds. Colgan, who was secretary of the Tyneside Catholic Social Guild, said that Catholics welcomed an investigation into guild activities but that it was unfair to condemn them beforehand. McCretton was more confrontational, challenging Aisbitt to provide evidence that guilds were detrimental to trade unionism. Aisbitt's attitude, McCretton asserted, would upset the 24,000 Catholic trade unionists in the north east and the proposal was an 'unwarrantable and unnecessary interference'.⁹⁸ These arguments failed to persuade the NEFTC executive which passed Aisbitt's resolution by thirteen votes to two (McCretton and Colgan). Two months later it transpired that none other than McCretton was the NEFTC delegate to the Annual Conference of Trades Councils where he was to oppose the formation of Catholic guilds within trade unions and ask for a TUC enquiry into them.⁹⁹ However, non-Catholics showed some sensitivity. In a letter to the *North Mail*, William Short (Newcastle TC general secretary), referring to a report on Catholic guilds in the paper of June 8, stated that it was incorrect 'as we have no objection to the guilds as such, but we do object to certain activities of these guilds which, in our opinion, is [sic.] detrimental to the institutions of the Trade Union movement'.¹⁰⁰ As it was, Short moved the resolution at the annual conference. (Both McCretton and Colgan were present as regional delegates). Short said he respected everyone's religious beliefs but was opposed to the guilds as they were established to further the interests of the church and not trade union members. An Oxford delegate seconded the resolution but it was defeated.¹⁰¹ The fact that the initiative had come from the TUC suggests that national trade union leaders were, at least by spring 1938, less worried about the sensibilities of their Catholic members than argued by Buchanan.

⁹⁷ See T. Buchanan & M. Conway, *Political Catholicism in Europe, 1918-1965* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996) pp265-266

⁹⁸ North east Catholic TGWU members had recently formed a Catholic businessmen's guild. *Sunday Sun*, 13/3/38, p13 and *North Mail*, 14/3/38, p7

⁹⁹ *Sunday Sun*, 15/5/38, p15 and *North Mail*, 16/5/38, p10

¹⁰⁰ *North Mail*, 17/6/38, p6

¹⁰¹ Report of Trades Council Annual Conference, 28/5/38 (WMRC, 36/T61/5) p35

It is difficult to be categorical about the attitudes of the majority of north east labour movement Catholics. Some, like Riley in Jarrow, were even prepared to fight against other Catholics for the Spanish Republic, putting politics before their religion, or because they noticed that in Spain there were Catholics fighting in large numbers on both sides and that Franco's forces contained many distinctly unchristian moors. However, Riley seems to have been exceptional. On the other side of the spectrum were McCretton and Colgan who voiced high-level opposition to support for the Republic. Generally, rank-and-file labour movement Catholics did not protest openly nor did they attempt to impede their party's activity on Spain. It is possible that the majority acquiesced but did not actively involve themselves in pro-Republic campaigning. The case of the ACTU certainly throws into doubt the proposition that Catholics felt powerless to change labour movement policy, though it could suggest merely that Catholics were largely indifferent to the policy or acquiesced rather than actively supported it. More likely, however, is a third proposition. As noted above, Catholics were significant in Jarrow DLP whose MP, like the DLP itself, was very active on Spain. If these labour movement Catholics were representative of majority labour movement Catholic attitudes in the north east, then this is evidence for the proposition that the majority actively supported the 'Aid Spain' campaigns. The fact that McCretton's threatened protest from 24,000 Catholic trades unionists in the region over the TUC's proposed move against their guilds did not materialise also suggests that McCretton was out of touch with majority labour movement Catholic feeling in the region. The aggregate effect on the north east labour movement of the controversies surrounding Catholics and the Spanish civil war can now be assessed.

The Damage Done to the Labour Movement

When assessing the damage that controversy over Catholics, their guilds and the Spanish civil war caused, the actual strength of Catholics in the north east labour movement should be acknowledged. During the controversy over Catholic guilds in March 1938, McCretton claimed that there were 24,000 Catholic trade unionists in the north east.¹⁰² This was a very small proportion, less than 5% in fact, of the 500,000 trade unionists the NEFTC claimed to represent in the region.¹⁰³ Thus, the question of Catholic guilds and trade union

¹⁰² Presumably McCretton's figure was for that of all Catholic trade unionists in the region rather than for actual members of Catholic guilds.

¹⁰³ As seen in chapter one, the NEFTC was disingenuous to claim that *it represented all* these trade unionists, but it is likely that 500,000 trade unionists existed in the north east in the period (defining the region as the largest geographical area possible, within reason).

donations to the Spanish Republic was only ever going to directly affect a small proportion of trade unionists in the region, despite the concentrations of Catholics in parts of the north east.

Within the labour movement, the public debate surrounding Catholics and the Spanish civil war, like those in all the regional newspapers, had very few protagonists. As with the newspapers, Aisbitt was the main anti-Catholic with McCretton and Colgan on the other side. The rest of the NEFTC supported Citrine on Catholic guilds (hardly a radical stance) but refused to expel McCretton or allow the controversy to get out of hand. Buchanan cited the example of the controversy within the NEFTC between McCretton and Newcastle TC in order to illustrate the point that 'For many Catholics there was a feeling that the events in Spain were ushering in a new wave of religious intolerance in Britain [...]'.¹⁰⁴ Whilst he actually quoted the resolution passed by the NEFTC, that questions of religion should not be a matter for trade union controversy, he did not comment on what was arguably the real significance of this series of events: that whilst there was controversy, incidents such as this illustrate that most of those involved in the labour movement attempted to minimise bitterness and divisions created by the conflict in Spain and that therefore these divisions were not great. McCretton himself, either out of loyalty to the labour movement and a desire not to exacerbate possible splits, or from fear of ignominious defeat in the public eye, does not appear to have taken up Aisbitt's challenge, of October 1936, to a public debate on the question of Catholics in the labour movement.

The NEFTC stance on Catholic Guilds also seems to have provoked little anger amongst rank-and-file Catholic trade unionists. Some did write letters to the papers on the subject. For example, John Davison, who stated that a Catholic business guild referred to in the press was only for spiritual welfare and not involved in politics. Whilst not a member of this guild himself, he asserted that it was not breaking any rules. Yet, Davison's letter revealed that he may have been a Conservative anyway: he claimed that he was a trade unionist 'in the true sense, not political'.¹⁰⁵ The threatened protests from 24,000 north east Catholics over attacks on their guilds did not materialise. And, as has been seen, the NEFTC resolution was defeated at Trades Council conference in 1938. Of course, had the resolution passed at conference, there may have been Catholic protest, but even this is by no means certain. What is certain is that if there had been Catholic protest, other than McCretton's, before the NEFTC took the matter to conference, it had made no difference to their attitude. The NEFTC was not worried by McCretton's threats, presumably because it regarded them as empty. Both McCretton and

¹⁰⁴ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, p172

¹⁰⁵ *Sunday Sun*, 20/3/38, p13

Colgan themselves could not have been particularly put out by events in the NEFTC or they would have resigned in protest. A secure position of power within the labour movement was obviously worth more to them than acting out of principle to protest at a perceived attack on their religion. By 1939 none of these three protagonists held positions in the executive of the NEFTC (due to rotation of posts rather than resignations), thus a recurrence of these divisions was less likely.¹⁰⁶

On the political side of the labour movement, though there were tensions that involved Catholics in some Labour Parties, these tensions do not appear to have been generated or exacerbated by the Labour Party's stance on Spain. Another criticism of Buchanan can be made in this context. He pointed out that a Labour Party analysis of its poor election results in Lancashire in the 1938 elections (a net loss of seventeen seats) blamed the 'Spanish factor'. Moreover, the problem was a localised one 'limited by the very nature of Catholic working class distribution in Britain'.¹⁰⁷ It was, nevertheless, damaging as Catholics were often concentrated where the Labour movement was strongest, for example in Glasgow. As Buchanan noted initially, Catholic Irish immigrant support was the mainstay of Labour's electoral base in the north east as well as on Clydeside, in the north west and parts of London.¹⁰⁸ Yet, whilst Buchanan did cite the examples of the controversy in the NEFTC over the issue of Catholics and Spain and later the Catholic Guilds, he did not mention the electoral fortunes of Labour in the north east and whether there was any noticeable reaction to Labour's stand on Spain from working class Labour-voting Catholics in the region.¹⁰⁹

Had Buchanan examined the north east in more detail, he would have noticed that it was very different to Lancashire in terms of working class Catholic voting patterns. As noted above, Ellen Wilkinson criticised Catholics outright in her speeches. Yet Jarrow Labour Party suffered no noticeable backlash at all at the municipal polls. Labour control over Jarrow council was weakened by a split in the party from late 1936 to summer 1938. Despite this Labour still fared well at the polls in these years, taking a seat from the Labour 'rebels' in November 1937 and retaining control of the council after the November 1938 elections.

¹⁰⁶ Perhaps it was not coincidence that two of the main protagonists, Aisbitt and McCretton, had their power bases in two TCs (Newcastle and Gateshead) that had a tradition of rivalry reflecting general enmity between the two cities (see chapter two).

¹⁰⁷ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, p186

Why the 'Spanish factor' was not mentioned in relation to elections in 1936 and 1937, when the issue was more controversial, is unclear.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p169

¹⁰⁹ As pointed out by Neil Riddell, it is in practice very difficult to determine the precise strength of the Catholic vote in any given constituency.

N. Riddell, *op cit.*, p189

There was no election in Jarrow in November 1936 due to a truce between the parties in order to conduct the Jarrow march. It is conceivable that had there been an election in 1936 Labour would have suffered from a Catholic backlash, but the evidence suggests otherwise: Labour fared well in the two wards (East and Central) with the largest concentrations of Catholic voters in 1937 and 1938.¹¹⁰ In 1937 Labour faced ILP and Moderate opposition in both wards. In Central, Labour (Riley) won with a 346 majority. The situation was more difficult for Labour in East ward as W.E. Hopper was the ILP incumbent. Yet even here Labour won by 24 votes over the Moderate (526 votes) and Hopper (525 votes.) The following year, Patrick Scullion was returned unopposed in East ward and Labour won Central ward with a 107 majority over the Moderates. The Moderate vote had increased by 90 (the same number the ILP candidate polled in 1937) and the Labour vote decreased by 150.¹¹¹ It was most unlikely that this was a delayed reaction to the Spanish civil war, however, as it was the strongly pro-Republic Riley who had been elected in the ward in 1937 with a much larger vote. It would, of course, be stretching the argument too far to claim that a strong pro-Republic stance *was a vote winner* among Catholics, but it certainly did not seem to be a vote loser.

In Gateshead, another strongly Catholic area, Labour's electoral fortunes were not as good as in Jarrow but they were still not disastrous. Only taking control of the council in 1935 Labour lost two seats to Moderates in 1936, bringing the parties level. The parties remained tied the following year but a Labour gain in 1938 allowed them to consolidate their position.¹¹² There is no evidence that the two losses to Moderates in 1936 were due either wholly or in part to Labour's attitude to the Spanish civil war.

The only negative effect the issue may have had at the polls was in 1936, and it is just as likely that local or other issues caused the two Labour losses. North ward, the most strongly Catholic, returned a Labour member in 1936, but the Labour majority decreased from 920 in 1935 (when McCretton was elected) to 595 in 1936.¹¹³ This could have been because of the Spanish civil war but this is unlikely. The Labour Party did not form Gateshead SMAC until December 1936, a month after the election, so its approach to the Spanish issue was unlikely to have made any difference to election results in November 1936. It is conceivable that the national Labour policy had an impact, but there is no direct evidence in local election reports

¹¹⁰ F. Ennis, *op cit.*, p82

¹¹¹ *Evening Chronicle*, 3/11/36, p6; 2/11/37, p10 and 2/11/38, p9

¹¹² *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/35, p4; 2/11/36, p6; *North Mail*, 12/10/37, p5; 2/11/37, p1 and 2/11/38, p9

¹¹³ North ward was not contested in 1937 and 1938.

Evening Chronicle, 2/11/35, p4; 3/11/36, p6; 2/11/37, p10 and 2/11/38, p9

that the Spanish civil war issue was even mentioned by any of the parties, let alone that it was prominent.¹¹⁴ Local issues, the candidates' personality or a lower turnout (figures for which are unavailable) could have caused the decline in the Labour vote in North ward.¹¹⁵ This was unlike the situation in Birmingham where Conservatives used the Spanish civil war issue in elections to attack the Labour Party and discredit it in the eyes of Catholics. Many within the Birmingham labour movement thought that poor results at a Parliamentary by-election in October 1936 and at the municipal polls in the period were due to the Spanish civil war being a vote loser for Labour. The 1938 municipal elections came at a time of renewed labour movement activity over Spain and for the third year in a row Labour lost seats on Birmingham City council. Over the whole country, Conservatives only made more gains in Liverpool.¹¹⁶ Presumably Conservatives and Liberals in the north east did not recognise the Spanish civil war as a vote winner for them, and, as has been argued, it was not.

The fortunes of Labour in a third Catholic area, Sunderland, contrast with those of Jarrow and Gateshead. Gains in 1934 and 1935 gave Labour control of Sunderland council. However, as at Gateshead, the November 1936 elections saw the Independents fight back, making four gains at the expense of Labour. Single gains in the following two years meant that in 1938 Independents actually wrested control of the council from Labour. Ostensibly, here was evidence of how the Spanish civil war could damage the Labour vote. Yet there is no evidence directly linking the two factors. It is likely that local issues, such as the Labour mayor Summerbell's pacifism, were more important factors in explaining these Labour losses (see chapter one). In October 1936, the *Sunderland Echo* urged electoral support for the Moderates by appealing to the electorate's patriotism and highlighting the mayor's refusal to visit *HMS Cairo*.¹¹⁷ There was no mention of the Spanish civil war. As noted above, Sunderland Labour Party was not particularly involved in much of the 'Aid Spain' work. Like its Gateshead counterpart, Sunderland SMAC consistently depicted its role as humanitarian and the rights and wrongs of fascist aggression were not mentioned. The committee went as

¹¹⁴ The Gateshead Ratepayers' Association newspaper criticised the Labour administration for its general inactivity and especially the fact that the municipality was one of only four in the country that was not co-operating with the government over Air Raid Precautions measures. There was no mention of the Labour Party's stand on Spain and no evidence of a specific appeal to the Catholic vote at all.

Gateshead Municipal News, 10/36 and 11/36

¹¹⁵ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/36, p4

¹¹⁶ P.D. Drake, op cit., pp104-5, 137, 156 and 202

¹¹⁷ *Sunderland Echo*, 30/10/36, p2

Curiously, the only mention of 'Spain' in the election was of a Moderate candidate called Tom Spain who was alleged to have been involved with the BUF.

Ibid., 31/10/36 pp3 and 5

far as to call for help *for both sides* in the Spanish conflict.¹¹⁸ Of course it is possible that the mayor's high profile involvement was enough to alienate working class Catholics, but again there is no direct evidence of this.

The examples of Jarrow, Gateshead and Sunderland reveal that there was no single experience of electoral fortunes for Labour in areas with large Catholic Labour-voting populations in this period and that there were differences even within the localities. Jarrow, with the largest working class Labour-voting Catholic population and the most outspoken and high profile Labour supporter of the Republic in the form of Ellen Wilkinson, experienced the best election results of the three areas. Sunderland, with arguably the least Labour support for the Republic (apart from Summerbell), suffered the most at the polls. There seems to be no correlation between these two factors, suggesting both that there was no uniform working class Catholic reaction to Labour's policy on Spain and that the issue was not particularly important as regards Catholic Labour Party support in the region.¹¹⁹

| | 1935 | 1936 | 1937 | 1938 |
|---------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Blyth | One Labour gain. | One Labour loss. | One Labour gain. | One Labour loss. |
| Durham City | One Labour gain. | No change. | One Labour loss. | One Labour loss. |
| Newcastle | No change. | Four Labour losses. | Three Labour losses. | No change. |
| South Shields | No change. | Four Labour gains. | One Labour gain | One Labour gain. |
| | | Level with Moderates. | and control of Council. | |
| Tynemouth | No change. | One Labour gain. | No change. | Two Labour gains. |
| Wallsend | Four Labour losses. | Four Labour losses. | No change. | Four Labour gains. ¹²⁰ |

The large differences in Labour's electoral fortunes in north east municipalities that were not noted for their large working class Catholic populations underlines this point (see table above). Thus, as there was no clear pattern in Labour's election results in Catholic areas, equally there was no obvious pattern in those areas of the north east that did not have large Labour-voting working class Catholic populations. Whilst Labour did not do particularly well (apart from at South Shields), there was a marked difference between fortunes both in areas

¹¹⁸ *North Mail*, 1/10/36, p7; 3/11/36, p1; 2/2/37, p7; 2/11/37, p1 and 2/11/38, p1, *Evening Chronicle*, 3/11/36, p6; 2/2/37, p5; 2/11/37, p10 and 2/11/38, p9

¹¹⁹ The election results, particularly for Sunderland, are confused by a number of factors. The parties opposing Labour had the annoying tendency to change their names from election to election. At Sunderland the Progressive Reform Party of 1934 presumably became the Independents in 1935 and Moderates in 1937.

¹²⁰ *North Mail*, 12/9/36, p9; 3/11/36, p1; 2/11/37, pp1 and 9; 6/10/38, p5; 2/11/38, p1 and p9; 9/12/38, p5; *Evening Chronicle*, 3/11/36, p6; 2/11/37, p10 and 2/11/38, p9

where the party was fairly strong (Blyth, Wallsend) and where it was weakly represented (Durham City, Tynemouth). There is no positive evidence suggesting that the attitude of the party towards the Spanish civil war either nationally or locally was an issue in the minds of significantly large numbers of voters. Labour's electoral fortunes were certainly no worse in Catholic areas than in other areas where Catholic voters were not so prominent, again suggesting that Catholic Labour voters were not particularly bothered by Labour's position regarding Spain and that Labour's electoral experience in Lancashire was perhaps the exception rather than the rule. In conclusion, the divisions caused by the Spanish civil war in areas such as the north east where Labour relied on working class Catholic votes in some localities, were less significant and wide reaching than the impression given by historians such as Buchanan.

That labour movement Catholics largely followed their political rather than religious leaders can be explained by the high degree of integration that characterised the Irish Catholic experience in the north east. Several historians have argued that the experience of Irish immigrants in the north east was characterised by an absence of indigenous hostility and widespread acceptance of them as part of the wider community.¹²¹ For example, MacDermott argued that there was no evidence that the concentration of Catholics in certain areas of Newcastle was due to 'pressures from the indigenous population of a racial or religious character that would lead to the development of a ghetto mentality [...]'.¹²² This differentiated the region strongly from west central Scotland and north west England. Keating's explanation for this was that there was a common 'community of occupation, interest and struggle'.¹²³ Another part of the explanation was that the Reformation had not had a large impact on parts of the north east, particularly Northumberland, and thus Irish immigrants found themselves

¹²¹ David Byrne agreed with Keating and Cooter about this and disagreed with Smailes who argued that by 1931 immigrants had not developed roots in the region.

D. Byrne, op cit., p31 and 35

¹²² T.P. MacDermott, op cit., p163

By the 1850s the Irish had established a bridgehead in the region for other immigrants. Cooter agreed, arguing that Irish in the north east had a unique position relative to other areas due to the 'solvent nature of the society into which they entered'.

R.J. Cooter, 'The Irish in County Durham and Newcastle', M.A. Thesis, University of Durham (1972) pp60-1, quoted in T.P. MacDermott, op cit., p174

¹²³ J. Keating, *Irish Heroes in the War* (Everett & Co., 1917) p21, quoted in D. Byrne, op cit., p31

There were, so course, some tensions. For example, the 'Battle of Sandgate' in May 1851 which began as a fight between police and Irish immigrants and ended when indigenous workers joined in on the police's side and chased the Irish off. Thus, as pointed out by D.M. Jackson in a recent discussion of an Irish riot in Newcastle in 1866, and in a Ph.D. thesis, indigenous tolerance of Irish immigrants in the north east should not be overstated.

N. McCord, 'Some aspects of north east England in the nineteenth century, *Northern History*, Vol.8 (1972) pp85-6; D.M. Jackson, op cit., pp49-82 and C. Scott, 'A Comparative Re-examination of Anglo-Irish Relations

entering a more accepting environment.¹²⁴ By 1914 the Irish were so integrated in the region that it produced the largest distinctive Catholic Irish contribution to the British war effort in the form of the Tyneside Irish Brigade. This integration also characterised Irish workers' involvement in the labour movement. Archer argued that Irish trade unionists in the north east did not have the reputation of being blacklegs as they did in Wales. In fact, they were important in the development of trade unions in the region.¹²⁵ The only substantial evidence of Irish workers being used as blackleg labour came in the 1844 miners' strike when Lord Londonderry threatened to import Irish workers to break the strike. MacDermott, agreeing with Cooter, argued that, for several reasons, this only happened on a very small scale. In general, Irish and indigenous workers co-operated well and many Irish became involved in the DMA. There was some very limited Irish blacklegging but these cases were exceptional and soon forgotten.¹²⁶ Given this exceptional degree of integration, it was natural for Catholics in the labour movement to accept their movement's view of the Spanish civil war and reject their church's depiction of it. However, it was different when their movement proposed policies which would have had a *direct impact on their own way of life*. This explains the different reactions of north east Catholics to the issues of birth control (which precipitated the split in Gateshead Labour Party in 1931) and education (which prompted the formation of the ACTU). There was little obvious Catholic anger at the trade unions' attitude to Catholic guilds presumably because few Catholics were involved in them or because Catholics thought the union movement had a right to govern its internal workings. However, despite this high degree of integration, the experience of north east labour movement Catholics was not exceptional. Working class Catholics in heavily unionised and strongly socialist areas such as South Wales were more likely to place politics above religion.¹²⁷ In fact, even where the labour movement was not strong, Catholics sometimes did not let their religion inform their politics. In the Birmingham labour movement, whilst there was some division over the issue of the Spanish civil war and disaffection expressed by some Catholic Labour Party members, most were 'loyal to party rather than church'.¹²⁸

in Nineteenth Century Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle-upon-Tyne', Ph.D. Thesis, Durham University (1998) (quoted in Jackson).

¹²⁴ A. Archer, *The Two Catholic Churches. A Study in Oppression* (SCM Press, 1986) pp20, 53-54 and J.E. Keating, op cit., pp314.

¹²⁵ A. Archer, op cit., p54 and D.M. Jackson, op cit., p68

¹²⁶ T.P. MacDermott, op cit., pp170-3

¹²⁷ N. Riddell, op cit., p176

Catholic Attitudes to Communism and the United and Popular Fronts

There is little direct evidence of north east Catholic attitudes to association with Communists. In his speech of November 1936, Aitken claimed that, as well as organising internally against support for the Republic, Catholics strongly opposed activity on the Hunger March and Communist affiliation to Labour.¹²⁹ All the comments relating to the problems with the first part of Aitken's assertion (about Catholics resisting 'Aid Spain' campaigning within the labour movement) apply equally to this second part. If Catholic opposition to association with Communists was so strong, why was there not one letter expressing this in the north east press from an identifiable Catholic trade unionist? There were certainly letters from left wingers supporting the strategies and these did not prompt a response from Catholic opponents. The fact that the majority of labour movement Catholics in the region appeared to support the Spanish Republic, which their church had attempted to depict as Communist, also suggests that Catholics may not have been averse to Communism.

However, the lack of overt Catholic opposition to Communist ventures in the north east labour movement can be explained in another way. Labour support of the Spanish Republic was a national policy whilst the party remained hostile to association with Communists. Furthermore, the NEFTC remained opposed to association with Communists and Newcastle TC, though involved in united and popular front activity itself, did not attempt to change the NEFTC's policy on the issue. Had it done so, it is likely that McCretton *et al* would have publicly opposed the move. In this scenario, Aisbitt would have been in the minority with the majority supporting official movement policy and rejecting any association with Communists. On Spain, Catholics opposed to supporting the Republic were in a minority. On Communism, Catholics were very much part of the majority feeling and, as such, did not need to particularly oppose association with Communists. Catholics, if they *had* tried to oppose Labour support of the Republic (and it appears that, in the main, they did not), failed to make any palpable difference in the region. Had it been only Catholics who were opposed to Communism within the labour movement, there is no doubt that they again would have failed to be influential. In fact, Catholics could not dictate the policy of their local labour movement on Communism even where they were numerous. Thus, despite being very strong (but not in the majority) in Jarrow LP&TC, Catholics still failed to prevent the organisation from opposing the exclusion of Communists (the Black Circular) and supporting association with Communists in the popular front (see chapters four, five and six). If labour movement non-

¹²⁸ P.D. Drake, op cit., p100

¹²⁹ CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

Catholics desired the united or popular fronts, their views held sway, even in Catholic strongholds.¹³⁰ Thus Aitken was trying to blame Catholics for what was a far more widely held attitude within the labour movement. By denouncing labour movement Catholics for the failure of Communist initiatives in the north east, Aitken was indulging in wishful thinking. It is comforting to think that, if it were not for an influential minority, your creed would hold sway.

As noted in chapter one, Colgan moved the NEFTC resolution of opposition to involvement with Communists in spring 1936. The only other evidence of Catholic opposition to Communism is particularly significant as it is provided by the strongly pro-Republic Riley, who, given his radical stance, might have been expected to support Communism and the united and popular fronts.¹³¹ Commenting on the 1938 NUGMW Congress, Riley wrote; ‘Brother Marshall made a splendid job of his [presidential] address [which] certainly knocked the nonsense out of the back part of the agenda, re “Unity”, Communism, etc.’.¹³² Riley had not moderated rapidly between 1937 and 1938. He had opposed Communists from at least 1937, as shown by his denunciation of supposed Communists in Jarrow Labour Party when he was momentarily a rebel outside of it (see chapter two). Riley’s example is important as it reveals that strong Catholic support for the Spanish Republic was wholly compatible with anti-Communism. Moreover, if someone as militant on Spain as Riley remained anti-Communist, then it is likely that the vast majority of Catholics were also. Not surprisingly, then, there was no obvious support for the united and popular fronts from any north east labour movement Catholics, including David Adams MP, who, like Riley, became an active supporter of the Spanish Republic (see chapter six).¹³³ Apart from Colgan, and Aitken’s suspect comment, Riley provided the only real indication from a north east labour movement Catholic of ill feeling towards the united and popular fronts and Communism. It seems that those Catholics who did not support the proposals of unity with Communists, or with Communists and Liberals, generally kept quiet on the subject, in the same way as those opposed to or uncomfortable with support for the Republic simply did not involve themselves in the relief work. It is clear that Catholics, even those who strongly supported the Spanish Republic such

¹³⁰ The behaviour of Jarrow LP&TC over Communism again illustrates the little regard that many in the regional labour movement had for Catholic sensibilities. Despite its attitude, as noted above, Jarrow Labour did not suffer unduly at the polls.

¹³¹ Riley was a critic of the PLP. At a Durham Conference on the abdication crisis Riley criticised the PLP as it ‘had not put up one tangible solution’ to the problem of the Special Areas. He also said: ‘The constitution is not a sacred thing. The constitution is rotten’, an almost sacrilegious comment for a Labour Party member to make. *North Mail*, 14/12/36, p5

¹³² NUGMW Journal, 8/38

¹³³ Adams certainly praised Russia openly, but support for a Communist regime abroad did not necessarily indicate support for Communism at home, as many Labour leaders showed. *Blaydon Courier*, 20/7/39, p4

as Riley, would have sided with the right of the labour movement against left wing proposals for the united or popular fronts.

Thus Catholics in the labour movement were a barrier to united action with Communists, but only because their opinions on the topic coincided with the majority feeling and national policy. Their opposition was fortified by their religion, but they could not prevent the labour movement from associating with Communists, if the majority of non-Catholics supported it (such as in Jarrow). The non-Catholic majority in the north east labour movement was willing to risk alienating Catholics by organising campaigns to support the Republic and acting against Catholic guilds, suggesting it anticipated minimal problems. The fact that there was very little Catholic backlash reveals that regional labour movement leaders were right not to be particularly worried. The Spanish civil war was not particularly internally divisive for the labour movement because many, if not the majority of north east Catholic labour movement activists, accepted their party's version of the conflict (that it was democracy against fascism), rather than their church's version (that it was atheist Communism against Christianity). Support for the Republic did not equate to support for Communism in the minds of Catholics so they could help the Republic and oppose Communism without fear of contradiction. This suggests that Lynn overstated the power of the Catholic Church to influence the Catholic vote. Certainly, labour movement Catholics seem to have generally been more influenced by their political leaders' viewpoints than by their spiritual leaders' ones. As opposition to Communism was common to both, Catholics were opposed to the united and popular fronts. The evidence of united front activity in the region in 1936 suggests that there was no strong desire for unity in the official labour movement. Internal labour movement disunity and Catholic opposition to atheist Communism were also barriers to the united front. Bearing these considerations in mind, discussion now turns to the impact of the Unity Campaign in the north east.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Unity Campaign and the United Front, 1937-1939

The central aim of the Unity Campaign was the 'unity of the working class within the framework of the Labour Party'.¹ Also aiming to promote the adoption of a more militant policy by the Labour Party, it was officially launched on 24 January 1937 at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester. Cripps, Jimmy Maxton (ILP) and Harry Pollitt (CP) spoke. The following months saw public meetings and united front agitation throughout the country. There were three major Unity Campaign meetings in the north east in 1937. The first demonstration was on 21 March with Willie Gallacher MP (CP), Jimmy Maxton MP (ILP) and G.R. Strauss (Socialist League) as the main speakers. The second demonstration was at Gateshead on 8 May. Stafford Cripps spoke and then addressed a meeting in Sunderland in the evening. On 4 July, there was another Unity meeting at Newcastle with Cripps, Harold Laski and William Mellor. In addition, there was a Unity meeting specifically confined to Gateshead in March 1937.² This chapter will assess the Unity Campaign in the north east in terms of the size and impact of its meetings and the nature of the support they drew. It will then examine other united front activity in the region in order to assess whether the campaign had any wider impact on the official labour movement and its relations with the other left parties. Finally, an assessment will be made of the Unity Campaign's relative successes and failures from which its overall effect in the region can be determined.

The Organisation of the Unity Campaign and the Nature of its Support

As elsewhere, the Unity Campaign in the north east was manifest in local 'Unity' committees comprised of CP, Socialist League and ILP members.³ These committees organised meetings specifically on the issue of 'unity', and also on issues such as the Spanish civil war. For example, a 'welcome home' demonstration for the *Linaria* strikers was arranged

¹ F. Brockway, *The Workers Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) p220

² *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5; 4/37, p2; 5/37, p5; 7/37, p6; *North Mail*, 8/2/37, p5; 20/3/37, p6; *Newcastle Journal*, 5/7/37, p14; 10/5/37, p8; *Sunday Sun*, 9/5/37, p9 and *New Leader*, 25/6/37, p6. Although billed as a 'Unity' demonstration, the meeting in September 1937 in Newcastle seems to have been a wholly Communist affair. *North Mail*, 20/9/37, p7

³ Nationally, by mid-March there were already 66 local Unity Committees. There were more than 100 by early April. In the north east, there is evidence of Unity Committees at Gateshead, North Shields, Whitley Bay and Newcastle.

Daily Worker (southern edition), 20/3/37, p1; *Tribune*, 2/4/37, p11 and P. Seyd, 'Factionalism Within the Labour Party. The Socialist League, 1932-37' in A. Briggs & J. Saville, *Essays In Labour History, 1918-1939*, Vol.3 (Croom Helm, 1977) p220

through the co-operation of local Unity Committees in March 1937.⁴ The same month saw a 'Unity meeting for Spain' in South Shields. Unity committees also sent speakers to meetings in other localities. Thus in April 1937, Gateshead Unity Committee sent representatives to a meeting in Wallsend.⁵ These local committees were in turn co-ordinated by a North East Area Unity Campaign Committee, formed after the first major north east Unity Campaign meeting in March 1937 and chaired by Mark Simpson (ILP). This body organised the big meetings with national speakers held at venues in Newcastle and Gateshead.⁶

The first main 'Unity' meeting was well attended. The *Newcastle Journal* commented that, with Newcastle's Palace Theatre 'packed' and the City Hall overflow meeting almost filled, the organisers had 'reason to be satisfied'.⁷ There were 5,000 present and 2,000 'pledge cards' (which declared the signatory's support for unity) were signed with £83 taken in the collection.⁸ The fact that less than half those present signed the pledge cards possibly indicates that many were there out of curiosity and were not convinced by the speakers. Alternatively, perhaps expecting a smaller turnout, the organisers only brought 2,000 pledge cards with them, in which case the fact that they were all signed was a reflection of the popularity of the message. Seventy pledge cards were signed and 'great harmony prevailed throughout' the Gateshead Unity meeting in March 1937: 'The unanimous feeling for Unity displayed by the conference was a surprise even to the promoters of it, who had expected some opposition'.⁹ There are very few details of the main Unity meeting in Gateshead in May, except that it was 'very successful' and 'well attended' by union and Labour representatives and others.¹⁰ At the 4 July meeting there were 2,000 present with the collection amounting to £36-10-0. It was, according to *Tribune*, 'a splendid demonstration of the depth of support' for the campaign.¹¹ Yet the attendance was less than half that of the first meeting in March. Commenting on the enthusiasm at the demonstration in the *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 'Ishmael', argued that the attendance was all the more remarkable as the organising committee had only had two weeks to act. Moreover, due to bad weather, the organisers had to change all their plans a few hours

⁴ The *Linaria* crew, from the north east, had refused to take a cargo of nitrates to Seville, a Franco-held port (see chapter eight).

⁵ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5; 5/37, p5; *New Leader*, 19/3/37, p1; *North Mail*, 15/3/37, p7; 15/4/37, p8 and *Shields Gazette*, 15/3/37, p3

⁶ *New Leader*, 19/3/37, p1, 26/3/37, p6; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5 and 4/37, p2

⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 22/3/37, p6

⁸ *New Leader*, 26/3/37, p6

⁹ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5

¹⁰ As these reports were in the local Labour paper, perhaps it was to be expected that the report would paint a very positive gloss on proceedings. In the absence of other evidence this perspective must be accepted.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 5/37, p5

¹¹ *Tribune*, 9/7/37, p11

The *Newcastle Journal* (5/7/37, p14) put the collection at £32-6-0.

before the meeting was due to start. 'Ishmael' thought that the success of the campaign was because of the growing desire in the labour movement rank-and-file for working class unity, evinced by the presence at the meeting of around 1,500 trade unionists. 'Ishmael' 'came away from this meeting more firmly convinced of the need for a United Working Class Movement, with renewed hope for the future'.¹²

Expressions of support for the campaign from other individuals suggest that the Unity Campaign helped re-invigorate the left in the region. B.M. Foster wrote to *Tribune* expressing his support for the campaign. He attended a Unity demonstration in Newcastle: 'and from that great meeting I could visualise that the basis is laid in this country for a mighty revival of the working class'.¹³ Len Edmondson was also impressed with the 'terrific' Unity meetings. He claimed that the Unity Campaign had 'very considerable' support from ordinary members of the Labour Party and trades unionists, as indicated by the fact they could fill the Palace Theatre and City Hall in Newcastle on the same night (at the first main Unity meeting).¹⁴ The audience, he thought, were not just members of the ILP, Socialist League and CP but 'politically minded people' who were largely Labour Party members or loyal Labour voters.¹⁵

However, the evidence suggesting that the Unity Campaign was at least partly successful needs to be tempered by other means of assessment. One measure of the success of the campaign is the extent to which more moderate figures within the labour movement were drawn into proceedings. A notable person in this context was Walter Monslow, a 'moderate' ASLEF-financed former Labour PPC for Newcastle Central who chaired the first Newcastle 'Unity' demonstration. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to determine how many on the right of the labour movement in the region were drawn into the campaign as the politics of several of the figures involved remain unknown.¹⁶ Many of those prominently involved were already active on the Labour left: Sam Watson, Steve Lawther, Jim Stephenson and Will Pearson.¹⁷ Councillor Kegie chaired the Gateshead Unity Committee conference in March 1937. Though

¹² *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 7/37, p6

¹³ *Tribune*, 23/4/37, p14

¹⁴ Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,

¹⁶ These include B.W. Abrahart (North East District secretary of the Worker's Educational Association) and William Hepple (of the AEU district committee).

Gateshead Labour Herald, 3/37, p5; 7/37, p6; *Tribune*, 18/6/37, p7; *New Leader*, 25/6/37, p6 and *Sunderland Echo*, 14/12/36, p7

¹⁷ In July, Pearson moved the DMA resolution supporting the united front at MFGB conference (see below). Watson was interviewed by the *Daily Worker* on his support for the Unity Campaign. *Daily Worker*, 13/4/37, p2

his politics remain obscure, it is possible that he too was on the left.¹⁸ The same can be said of Roy Butchart who chaired the Gateshead conference in May. He was chairperson of the left wing Newcastle TC.¹⁹ These are the only specific names that relate to the Unity Campaign in the region. Of the people it has been possible to identify, only one, Monslow, was definitely from a moderate Labour position.

Some on the left who might be expected to have been active in the campaign were absent, revealing that the Unity Campaign did not even manage to mobilise the entire left wing of the regional labour movement. Most notable in this context was Ellen Wilkinson. Her attitude and her absence can be explained by a speech she made at a Spanish Medical Aid Committee meeting in London in November 1936 and the subsequent problems it brought her. At the meeting, she was heckled by left critics of the Labour Party. She responded:

‘If you expect me to come here as the national official of a very large trade union, and to do down those magnificent organised workers because of the leaders of that movement, whom I fight inside the movement as hard as ever I can, then you cannot talk about a united front even as a phrase’.²⁰

Wilkinson called for a united front but she also criticised the left: ‘I warn those of you who are dealing with the extreme left in London not to [...] cut yourselves off from the people. [...] If you are going to make your popular front composed of 99% Communists and 1% ILP then it does not represent the united working class’.²¹ Also reported as claiming that Labour would recognise a Franco government in Spain, Wilkinson sounded from this speech like a Labour left wing united front supporter who remained critical of the extreme left (though whether she included the CP in her conception of the extreme left is uncertain).

However, correspondence with Walter Citrine afterwards throws a different light on Wilkinson. Citrine, offended at some of Wilkinson’s claims as reported in the *Shields Gazette*, requested an explanation from her.²² Wilkinson, who had not seen the newspaper report, replied that far from attacking the Labour Party she had defended it against organised attacks from the floor. A remark she made about Spanish trade unionists ‘not being cut to the pattern of Sir Walter Citrine [...] was a joke which I would have said had you been on the platform. It

¹⁸ Kegie had been, along with Lawther and Ellen Wilkinson, a prominent figure in the ‘Popular Front protest’ against the Means Test at the end of August 1936. The CP was represented in the Unity Campaign by Charlie Woods and William Allan.

North Mail, 20/3/37, p6; 5/7/37, p7; 31/8/36, p7; *Newcastle Journal*, 5/7/37, p14 and *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5

¹⁹ *Newcastle Journal*, 10/5/37, p8

²⁰ Here, too, was a confusion, either deliberate or unintentional, of the united and popular fronts. *Shields Gazette*, 7/11/36, p1

²¹ *Ibid.*,

does happen incidentally to be true. I could not think of any trade unionists who would be less likely to conform to your desires than members of the CNT'.²³ She argued that her remark about fighting inside the labour movement was true as she had fought the Labour leadership over policy on the unemployed. Wilkinson also denied saying that Labour would recognise a Franco government, claiming that there was heckling from the floor to this effect. The heckling had angered both Wilkinson and the Communist leader Harry Pollitt, who claimed the hecklers were Trotskyists who 'make a habit of coming round to all such meetings and causing trouble'.²⁴ Taken as a whole, this evidence suggests that Wilkinson supported the united front in November 1936 (or the popular front or even both). At the same time, the exchange with Citrine reveals that she was not as critical of the Labour leadership as she might have been and that her party loyalty was strong. Experiences such as this, where she was both heckled by the left and received the attentions of labour movement leaders to the right, must have convinced Wilkinson that the united front was not worth the trouble it would bring to anyone prominent on the Labour left who supported it.

Another notable absentee from the Unity Campaign was Ruth Dodds, arguably the most important figure in the regional Socialist League. In a letter to Dodds in late January 1937, Cripps argued that 'This is not a united front at all, but a Unity Campaign, which is a very different thing'.²⁵ This suggests that Dodds was opposed to the united front, if not the Unity Campaign (though there is no direct evidence of Dodds openly opposing the Unity Campaign in the *Gateshead Labour Herald*, which she edited). The extent of the opposition to the Unity Campaign within the Socialist League in the north east remains unclear, but Dodds' stance must have influenced others.

As with the individuals involved, the identification of organisations which supported the Unity Campaign is problematic. The most detailed newspaper report is one on the first main Unity meeting in March 1937. At this meeting delegates from Newcastle TC, Gateshead LP&TC, the NUR, AEU, DMA, NMA, Labour Party and Co-Op branches were on the platform. At the local Gateshead Unity meeting in March 1937, Gateshead Socialist League, ILP and CP as well as 22 other organisations including trade unions, Labour Parties, DMA

²² Citrine letters to Wilkinson, 12/11/36 and 25/11/36 (BLPES, Citrine Papers, 6/2)

²³ Wilkinson letter to Citrine, 25/11/36 (BLPES, Citrine Papers, 6/2)

²⁴ Ibid.,

²⁵ Roger Eatwell used this evidence to illustrate opposition within the Socialist League to the Unity Campaign. Cripps letter to Ruth Dodds, 23/1/37 quoted in R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975) p132

lodges, Labour League of Youth and the Co-operative Party were represented.²⁶ Neither of these reports revealed precisely which branches were represented, so it is impossible to determine whether the same branches attended both meetings or not. Unfortunately, the newspaper report for the second main Unity meeting did not even supply general information regarding which organisations were represented, concentrating instead on Cripp's speech.²⁷ At the main meeting in July, newspaper reports revealed that Chopwell lodge banner was prominent but little else.²⁸

Other evidence suggests more labour movement organisations which were probably represented at Unity meetings. A Cambois lodge resolution to the NMA strongly objected to the Labour refusal of CP and ILP affiliation and condemned the proposal to expel Cripps and Socialist League members. It called upon the MFGB 'to do all in its power to secure the real unity of the Labour Movement into one united organisation'.²⁹ Sections of Wansbeck DLP were also likely to have been favourable to the Unity Campaign. In February 1937, Lemington ward committee of Newburn and District local Labour Party (LLP) submitted a resolution criticising the NEC's treatment of the Socialist League and against heresy hunting within the party.³⁰ At Wansbeck DLP annual meeting, Whitley Bay LLP submitted a resolution that strongly condemned the NEC in disaffiliating the Socialist League as it would split the movement. This and an amendment approving Socialist League policy and instructing the Labour national conference to reverse the NEC decision to disaffiliate it, were both passed. In a similar vein, Bedlington LLP passed a resolution calling for 'the unification of all political

²⁶ It is clear that the involvement of Newcastle TC indicated strong support. In March 1937 the TC passed a resolution registering 'our profound appreciation' of the Unity Campaign and pledging 'full support' for it. Three months later a resolution supporting the campaign and expressing disapproval of the NEC disaffiliation of the Socialist League was passed by Gateshead LP&TC.

William Short letter to Citrine, 29/3/37 (WMRC, 292/777.1/13) *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5; *New Leader*, 12/3/37, p6; 26/3/37, p6; 25/6/37, p6 and 26/3/37, p6

²⁷ *Sunday Sun*, 9/5/37, p9

Predictably, the most detailed report of a Unity meeting was in the *New Leader*, the ILP newspaper. Strangely, the *Gateshead Labour Herald*, which had given very positive and extensive coverage to the early Unity meetings, only devoted a few lines to the May 8 meeting, even though it had been in Gateshead itself. The report merely noted that the meeting had been 'well attended'.

See *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 5/37, p5

²⁸ *North Mail*, 5/7/37, p7

At least one local labour movement organisation which was not represented can be named. Eden lodge (DMA) decided to leave a circular on 'a unity conference' on the table. Presumably this was the 4 July conference. This was true to form as the lodge was particularly inactive on 'political' matters.

Eden Lodge Minutes, 17/6/37 (DRO, D/DMA/334/11)

²⁹ The resolution was meant to be discussed at the annual NMA council meeting but it was withdrawn.

Annual meeting, 15/5/37, NMA AR, 1937 (NRON, 759/68) and *North Mail*, 7/5/37, p10

³⁰ Newburn and District LLP Minutes, 10/2/37 (NRON, 527/B/3)

thought that has for its objective the abolition of the capitalist system'.³¹ However, there is no evidence of other labour movement organisations passing similar resolutions.

Identifiable organisations which supported the Unity Campaign in the region were, like the individuals involved, largely predictable, revealing that its appeal remained restricted to the left of the official labour movement. Chopwell lodge (DMA) was Communist controlled and therefore to be expected to support the campaign.³² The same was true of Cambois lodge (NMA) which was chaired by the Communist William Allan. Newcastle TC was, as seen in chapter one, very active in united front activity in 1936. Wansbeck DLP appears to have been fairly left wing, retaining the veteran left winger C.P. Trevelyan as its delegate to Labour conference until 1939. In May 1937 at a meeting on Spain and Czechoslovakia Trevelyan criticised the Labour leadership over Spain. Trevelyan argued that the labour movement needed to take on a new attitude, first locally and then nationally, the key being working class unity at home and abroad (with Russia and France).³³

Support for the Unity Campaign from Gateshead LP&TC was notable, given the negative reaction of Gateshead Labour councillors to the Hunger March and ILP attempts to raise money for the Spanish Republic in 1936. As noted above, Kegie was probably on the Labour left (though he was not a member of Gateshead Socialist League executive). Another high profile Gateshead Labour Party member openly praised the CP. In August 1938, Gateshead Labour mayor Pickering called for a 'complete united front' to deal with war, poverty and unemployment at the North East District CP Congress in Gateshead.³⁴ In December 1938 he sparked controversy when he extended a civic welcome to the CP at a *Daily Worker* bazaar. In his welcoming speech he told the CP that it was 'part of the bright spot of the political movement [...] You have a wonderful organisation'.³⁵ However, other

³¹ Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 20/3/37 (NRON, 527/A/3) and *North Mail*, 16/3/37, p3

³² Of course, it is quite possible that Chopwell lodge was singled out for special mention in the newspaper report precisely because it already had a 'reputation', which was in turn due to the media reporting of the events there in 1926 (see chapter one).

³³ However, Wansbeck DLP did not endorse Trevelyan's support for Cripps' call for a popular front which led to both their expulsions in 1939 (see chapter six).

Trevelyan speech at Palace Theatre, Newcastle 30/5/37 (NRL, CPT182)

An ILP member in the thirties, Jennie Lee, recalled that Trevelyan 'gave most of his time and strength to supporting the Unity Campaign'. Given this, it is difficult to understand why his biographer chose to completely ignore his political career after 1935.

J. Lee, *My Life With Nye* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981) p147 and A.J.A. Morris, *C.P. Trevelyan, 1870-1958. Portrait of a Radical* (Blackstaff Press, Belfast, 1977)

³⁴ Pickering was, in fact, referring to a popular front, as he added: 'I realise what a force it would represent if all the progressive forces were to come together' [my emphasis].

Daily Worker (final edition), 29/8/38, p5 and *North Mail*, 29/8/38, p5

³⁵ Interviewed afterwards, Pickering said that as mayor he could not officially support any party but that personally he supported the efforts of the CP and sympathised with them.

Sunday Sun, 11/12/38, p3

evidence suggests that Pickering's attitude was not widely held in Gateshead Labour Party.³⁶ In September 1938, the Labour council's town improvement committee refused the *Daily Worker's* district agency permission to hang a banner advertising this annual bazaar across a road.³⁷ There may have been strong support within Gateshead Labour for co-operation with Communists, but if this was the case it is reasonable to expect more firm evidence of practical co-operation than the utterances of one, albeit senior, Labour Party member.³⁸ With the little evidence available, it is more likely that the Gateshead LP&TC delegates supporting the Unity Campaign were merely those who were also Socialist League members (excluding Ruth Dodds, of course).³⁹

General support for the Unity Campaign in the north east was insubstantial. Of course, an attendance of 5,000 at the first Unity meeting was impressive, but those present were there as individuals rather than as representatives of labour movement organisations. Where there are figures for numbers of labour movement organisations represented, they are not impressive. At the second major Unity demonstration (in Gateshead) there were 65 delegates representing 35 organisations.⁴⁰ Presumably, an 'organisation' refers to anything from the smallest unit of labour movement organisation, the local branch: thus a miner's lodge or other union branch would be classified as an 'organisation', along with a local Co-operative Guild, a ward or local Labour Party branch. If this assumption is correct, then 35 organisations is a very small number for the entire north east. To put this figure in perspective, the DMA alone had around 175 lodges in this period. Moreover, this Unity meeting was only half the size of two TJPC organised meetings (on the International Peace Congress and on Spain) in Newcastle in autumn 1936. A newspaper report on the Gateshead Unity conference in March noted that 'Only Gateshead and its immediate surroundings were touched, or a larger Conference would have assembled'.⁴¹ Yet there were few in terms of size and numbers of organisations attending to differentiate the local and major Unity Campaign meetings in Gateshead. In fact, there were

³⁶ Others who appeared to be on the left in Gateshead Labour Party were Bart Kelly (see chapter five) and Mary Gunn who supported the united front 'Aid Spain' meeting in autumn 1936 (see chapter one). Gunn was not a member of Gateshead Socialist League executive before July 1936 but she may have been an ordinary member: she chaired an anti-fascist meeting organised by the Socialist League in Gateshead in December 1933. On the right was the Catholic Norman McCretton (see chapter three).

N. Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) p46

³⁷ Gateshead Council Minutes, Vol.8, 19/9/38, p926 (GPL)

³⁸ As discussed below, Gateshead Spanish Medial Aid committee was not based on the co-operation of Labour and other left parties. Equally, despite electing the left wing, pro-Communist Konni Zilliacus as its PPC, Gateshead Labour Party did not support the popular front (see chapter six).

³⁹ Thus, though members of both organisations, they would actually have been representing the Socialist League rather than the Labour Party, but chose to depict themselves as Labour Party delegates as this carried more weight.

⁴⁰ *Sunday Sun*, 9/5/37, p9 and *Newcastle Journal*, 10/5/37, p8

⁴¹ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 3/37, p5

only five more delegates and ten more organisations represented at the major meeting than at the local Gateshead meeting. Thus, if the local meeting was somewhat of a failure, the major meeting was very disappointing. As there are no figures for the numbers of organisations at the other meetings, it must be assumed that this meeting was representative.

The most significant support for the united front in 1937 again came from the two north east miners' unions though this was not a success attributable to the Unity Campaign as they had supported the united front in 1936. In February 1937 the DMA elected Cripps to address its annual gala which was, according to the *Sunday Sun*, 'all the more remarkable due to Cripps being out of favour with political heads'.⁴² In June 1937 the DMA sent a resolution to the MFGB arguing that it should lead the way in working class unity.⁴³ At the 1937 MFGB conference, it was a DMA resolution, moved by Will Pearson, that called for a united front. Paying tribute to Citrine and Bevin, Pearson criticised their anti-Communism and argued that, with a tripartite organisation, 'we would make the capitalist class melt like snow in the sun'.⁴⁴ After reminding delegates that the Russians had helped British miners in 1926, he concluded by remarking that Communism and Socialism were synonymous terms. A SWMF delegate seconded the resolution but there was some confusion over the vote. A NMA delegate said: 'we are supporting this resolution, not because it is an alliance with the Communist Party, but we considered it a different resolution to No.14' [the SWMF resolution, see below].⁴⁵ Durham, Northumberland and South Wales all voted for the resolution, but many of the smaller miners' unions voted against and it was defeated by 259,000 votes to 284,000 against.

However, there was by no means unanimity in favour of a united front in the two north east miners' unions and attitudes towards the CP were equivocal. Following immediately after the DMA resolution, the SWMF resolution (No.14), which outlined the need for the 'closest co-operation between all sections of the working class movement in this country' and called on all those paying the union political levy to be given rights within the Labour Party, provoked splits both between the north east miners unions and within the NMA. John Mordue (NMA) spoke against the resolution calling it the 'most dishonest resolution on the agenda' as it would allow Conservatives rights to attend Labour Party meetings.⁴⁶ If Communists were not prepared to accept the constitution of the Labour Party then they would have to stay out of it, he argued. Mordue had voted for the previous DMA resolution, as 'we believed there was a

⁴² *Sunday Sun*, 14/2/37, p1

⁴³ *North Mail*, 19/6/37, p6

⁴⁴ MFGB AR, 1937, p295 (DRO, D/EBF92/26)

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p303

possibility of bringing the whole of the working classes within the folds of the Labour Party'.⁴⁷ James Bowman (NMA) then said, notwithstanding Mordue's statement, that the NMA had yet to make a decision on the matter. In the event, Northumberland and South Wales voted for the resolution whilst the DMA voted against. The resolution was defeated, 130,000 votes to 413,000 against.⁴⁸ The defeat of these resolutions at MFGB conference 1937 was a massive blow for the united front.

Opposition to the Unity Campaign

There was very little overt opposition to the Unity Campaign from within the official labour movement. From the evidence available, there was only one area where Labour Party members were disciplined for support of the Unity Campaign. In Shildon, two Labour councillors and Socialist League members had their nominations for the local council withdrawn and new candidates were selected to replace them in the March 1937 UDC elections. Fearful of being dealt with in the same manner, seven other councillors promptly resigned from the Socialist League. Standing as 'unofficial Labour' at the election, the two rebels' election address argued that the Unity Campaign was not opposed to the Labour Party and that they had not joined the ILP or CP. They planned to appeal to the DLP but it is uncertain what then occurred. Given that Shildon was part of Bishop Auckland DLP (Hugh Dalton's constituency) and that in 1939 this DLP was the only one in the north east to expel members who supported the Cripps Petition Campaign, it is likely that their expulsions were upheld.⁴⁹ However, this was an isolated example of intolerant behaviour by the Labour Party in the region.

Of the north east Labour MPs, only Emmanuel Shinwell (Seaham) openly criticised the Unity Campaign. In December 1936 (before the Unity Campaign had been officially launched) he claimed that there were 'deep-seated cleavages' amongst the ILP, CP and Socialist League and that the three only agreed as all 'were frankly revolutionary in character, and professed to despise the method of peaceful social change which was the accepted basis of the Labour Party'.⁵⁰ As the masses were not 'enamoured of revolutionary devices', Shinwell 'doubted

⁴⁷ Ibid.,

⁴⁸ Ibid., p306

⁴⁹ *New Leader*, 5/3/37, p6 and 19/3/37, p6

Pimlott claimed that sometimes a year would go by without a single Bishop Auckland DLP executive meeting in the thirties. If this was the case, the party was remarkably efficient when it came to disciplining dissidents. B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) pp176-7

⁵⁰ *Newcastle Journal*, 21/12/36, p10 and *Sunderland Echo*, 21/12/36, p11

In the 1933 Labour conference Shinwell attacked Communist front organisations. In 1934 he supported the NEC's rejection of the united front.

Shinwell article in *Labour*, 7/34 (BLPES, Shinwell/5/12) and Labour Party AR, 1933, pp144-45

whether the new alliance would last long'.⁵¹ Yet, only two months before at a 'united' demonstration against the Means Test in Southampton, Shinwell 'deplored' the attitude of the TUC towards unity and had claimed that the unity of democratic forces against fascism was 'essential'.⁵² There is no obvious explanation of this sudden apparent U-turn in Shinwell's attitude. A consummate politician, perhaps in both cases Shinwell was merely telling his audience what he thought they wanted to hear.⁵³ Certainly his pronouncements in 1937 tended to emphasise his loyalty to Labour and his dislike of the deleterious influence of the left and its leaders. In June 1937, Shinwell predicted a Labour government within three years provided there was no war. He thought that Labour's only fear was 'silly dissension' in its own ranks:

'There are too many impressionable people who allow the glamour of certain individuals to overcome them. There are others who are always looking to the extreme left, forgetting that if Labour has to succeed we must keep our eyes on the objective and not turn whether to the right or to the left for a solution'.⁵⁴

Presumably referring to Cripps and his supporters on the Labour left, Shinwell announced that the party would not tolerate violation of the rules when a decision was reached. Shinwell's memoirs do not explain his apparent change from opposition in 1934 to support for the united front in 1936 and his subsequent reversion to opposition in late 1936 and 1937. In fact, if anything, they further confuse the issue.⁵⁵

Regardless of Shinwell's attitude, there is no evidence of obvious opposition to the Unity Campaign or, for that matter, the idea of the united front, in the surviving minutes of north east Labour Parties and trade unions. From the evidence, only one regional trade union leader expressed hostility towards the united front. John Yarwood, in his first public engagement after becoming NUGMW North East District Secretary, condemned the 'petty bickering and dissension' in the north east labour movement which, he claimed, had only recently emerged, probably due to the 'increased activity of Communists, arising out of the so-called united front formed some months ago'.⁵⁶ There is no record of other regional union

⁵¹ *Newcastle Journal*, 21/12/36, p10 and *Sunderland Echo*, 21/12/36, p11

⁵² *Daily Worker*, 15/9/36, p2

⁵³ Alternatively, perhaps the *Daily Worker* employed some poetic licence in its reporting.

⁵⁴ *Durham Chronicle*, 4/6/37, p10

An article of the same month reinforced this message.

Shinwell article in *Labour*, 6/37 (BLPES, Shinwell/5/12)

⁵⁵ Writing 25 years later, Shinwell recounted a shortened but consistent version of events (see chapter six).

E. Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice* (Odhams Press, 1955) pp134-5 and E. Shinwell, *Lead With the Left. My First Ninety Six Years* (Cassell, 1981) p103

⁵⁶ Yarwood took solace from the fact that the 'dissension is confined to a small section of the movement', although he did attribute unofficial disputes all over the country to the Communists.

Sunday Sun, 4/7/37, p13 and *North Mail*, 5/7/37, p2

leaders being as outspoken as this. As in 1936, anti-Communists did not generally feel the need to express their sentiments publicly.

On the terms discussed above, the Unity Campaign in the north east was evidently a failure. Most of the individuals prominently involved were on the far left and even some left wingers, such as Ellen Wilkinson and Ruth Dodds, were not obvious supporters. Few official labour movement organisations supported the campaign and many of those that did were identifiable as left wing controlled. Apart from the audience in the first meeting, many of whom were likely to have been there out of curiosity rather than support for the aims of the campaign, general support was also lacking. The miners were the main united front supporters in 1937 and their support existed well before the Unity Campaign began. This support was, as argued in chapter one, severely limited by the miners' reluctance to officially support practical united front efforts.

All of this tallies with the picture of the national failure of the campaign as described by Ben Pimlott. A caustic critic of the Labour left, Pimlott argued that Unity Campaign demonstrations were not 'mass'; in eight demonstrations in the first four weeks of the campaign the total attendance was 12,000, which was 3,000 *less* than the combined membership of the three organisations involved. By the end of March 1937 18,000 'Unity' pledge cards had been signed out of the 205,000 that had been distributed. These were, Pimlott claimed, 'scarcely impressive' figures.⁵⁷ However, it is still possible that the Unity Campaign had a palpable positive effect on relations between the left parties in the region, or that united front activity developed regardless of the campaign's apparent failure. To assess the impact of the Unity Campaign fully, united front activity, both when the campaign was underway and after it ended, must be examined in order to identify any positive changes in the relations between the left parties that indicate that they were more inclined towards unity. Thus, united front activity in the anti-Means Test campaigns, at municipal elections, around the Spanish civil war and the deteriorating international situation in 1938 will now be examined in turn.

⁵⁷ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977) p99. Although blaming the Labour leadership for showing 'little initiative' during the thirties (p2), Pimlott was far more critical of the Labour left which was 'consistently wrong on tactics' and not politically effective (p5). Slightly less critical was Chris Bryant who claimed that the Unity Campaign struck a chord with a swathe of opinion in the labour movement and the size of meetings provided some visible signs of success. However, even he conceded that public support was 'not exactly overwhelming'. C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps. The First Modern Chancellor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) p139

The Wider Effects of the Unity Campaign on the United Front: The Campaign Against the Means Test

A matter of days before the Unity Campaign officially began, there was a united front, NUWM anti-Means Test demonstration at South Shields. This was partly successful as it was supported by Newcastle, Jarrow and Felling TCs and a number of miners' lodges, suggesting that the Unity Campaign had some foundations on which to build.⁵⁸ However, an anti-Means Test march in Newcastle a few days after the Unity Campaign began suggests that united front activity on domestic issues was already flagging by early 1937. Though the march, which was jointly organised by Communists and Socialists, had the 'blessing' of 69 organisations including miners' lodges, Women's Co-operative Guilds, Labour Parties, CPs and trade unions, just a few hundred people participated. Furthermore, only one of many banners on the march was that of a local 'Socialist Party'; all the others belonged to Communists, suggesting the march was Communist-dominated and explaining its relatively diminutive size.⁵⁹

Of the two marches, the latter was more prescient. The Unity Campaign did not invigorate or stimulate more activity on domestic issues as, after February 1937, evidence of united front activities around the Means Test allowances becomes rare. A march organised by the North East March Council under the leadership of Communist Jim Ancrum which received support from a 'large number' of unions and four 'important' trades councils in February 1937 was the last significant NUWM organised demonstration in the north east.⁶⁰ After this there were only a handful of sporadic and more localised examples of united front co-operation on domestic issues. These included a meeting in South Shields in July 1937 to support the NUWM's petition for increased unemployment scales which had speakers from the NUWM, CP and Newcastle Labour Party.⁶¹ In September 1938, the NUWM invited 'all organisations, immaterial of their political or religious views' to a Gateshead conference to campaign for extra unemployed winter allowance, though it is unclear if it went ahead.⁶² Almost a year later, in August 1939, NUWM agitation against a new work centre for the unemployed in Newcastle produced a meeting of trade union officials in Newcastle with an NUWM organiser. The NUWM reported that the NMA, AEU and Newcastle Central DLP had given 'one hundred

⁵⁸ *Shields Gazette*, 23/1/37, p5

⁵⁹ The term 'Socialist Party' was used for Labour Party in many regional newspapers, presumably to ensure that voters regarded Labour as socialist. The judgements of journalists are, of course, problematic for the historian, but they have to suffice in cases where there is no other evidence available.

North Mail, 26/1/37, p2

⁶⁰ *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 19/2/37, p6

⁶¹ *Shields Gazette*, 23/7/37, p3

⁶² *Durham Chronicle*, 16/9/38, p8

percent' support to the campaign.⁶³ In general though, the NUWM was relatively inactive from spring 1937 and by December it was clear that the organisation was in a serious predicament. William Allan reported to the CP Central Committee that there was 'almost complete deadness' in unemployed agitation in the north east, despite the fact that the NUWM had many members in the region.⁶⁴ Moreover, although there were some 'good' NUWM members in the district, it was 'dominated by people against the party'.⁶⁵ Allan had recently visited Jarrow NUWM and been regarded as an interloper who had no right to interfere. Thus he thought that the NUWM had 'become a small club of a handful of people who seem to know everything but who seem to spend their time in arguing'.⁶⁶ Allan believed that the NUWM was an obstacle to organising the unemployed and that there was a danger it was becoming a trade union for the unemployed and not performing its main role of organising agitation. This was in line with national developments as the NUWM went into decline after the 1936 Hunger March and mass unemployed struggles became a thing of the past. The unemployed's plight assumed less importance for the CP and, as more NUWM members got work, activity declined and the organisation increasingly involved itself in small scale campaigning 'stunts'. It also became increasingly centralised which alienated many activists.⁶⁷ In fact, even before the 1936 Hunger March, Communist leaders mooted the idea of merging the NUWM with TUC unemployed organisations in accordance with the popular front strategy. Pollitt argued that the NUWM was already in a rut.⁶⁸

The official movement also seemed to have lost interest in the unemployed and there was no repetition of the DMA organised anti-Means Test marches of August 1936 when the official movement invited Communists to join them. Certainly, as far as domestic struggles are concerned, the united front peaked in summer 1936 with this unusual invitation from the official movement (which indicated little more than tolerance of Communism and not a desire

⁶³ *North Mail*, 22/8/39, p9

This was not particularly surprising, however, as the AEU was a relatively radical union and Newcastle Central Labour Party backed its PPC Lyall Wilkes when he supported Cripps and the popular front in 1939 (see chapter six). The NMA had supported the united front, 1936-7.

⁶⁴ Allan feared that increased unemployment would allow fascism to grow. Fascists were already 'making a very big effort to try and get the unemployed to swing towards them'.

CP Central Committee Minutes, 8/12/37, Reel No.4 (MLHA)

⁶⁵ Thus the perception of the NUWM as an organisation which was completely subordinate to the requirements of the CP is not completely accurate.

⁶⁶ Ibid.,

⁶⁷ Ibid.,

⁶⁸ R. Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence. A History of the National Unemployed Workers Movement, 1920-46* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1987) pp183-193

⁶⁹ As Murphy argued, this was unjustified given the size and relative success of the 1936 Hunger March. D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p208

to pursue a united front). The timing of the Unity Campaign was unfortunate, and it cannot be blamed for the decline in domestic activity, as the attention of both the official and unofficial labour movement shifted to the deteriorating international situation.

UDC and Municipal Elections

Regarding local election strategy, the CP in the region remained largely true to its policy of not fielding a candidate where there was a danger that a split left vote would allow a Moderate victory.⁶⁹ Thus in March 1937, the CP fielded two candidates against a 'trade union' and five Labour candidates, but no Moderates, in a five member ward of Houghton-le-Spring UDC. At Seaham, the Communist George Burdess stood against four Labour candidates but no Moderates.⁷⁰ At Houghton-le-Spring No.1 division of Durham County Council, Communists made the sacrifice for working class unity. Their candidate withdrew stating that he did not wish to split the 'working class vote'.⁷¹ This left a straight fight between Labour and Moderate candidates for a Labour held seat.

Yet the CP was not always prepared to sacrifice its candidate for the united front in March 1937. A Communist, James Ancrum, stood in Felling No.2 ward of Durham County Council against both Moderate and Labour opposition. The CP, Ancrum claimed, had suggested to Labour that they jointly select one candidate but Labour had refused to discuss this.⁷² Ancrum also ensured that the united front did not figure in the Felling UDC elections either. He defended his seat in spring 1937 against a Progressive and three Labour candidates and was elected along with two Labour candidates. However, Ancrum was an incumbent and it is doubtful that the Progressive candidate had much of a chance of benefiting from a split left vote in that particular seat. Moreover, the CP did not stand any other candidates for Felling.⁷³ Given the refusal of the Labour Party to discuss co-operation for Durham County Council elections, perhaps Ancrum had decided that it would be pointless to attempt to promote the united front in the UDC elections. Between 1937 and 1939, the CP only fielded candidates

⁶⁹ This was the policy outlined by the important local Communist William Allan. In March 1938, Allan said that when considering whether to stand candidates at local elections 'local strengths' should be considered and that there should not be rigid rules prohibiting standing Communist candidates in favour of attempting to get better Labour candidates chosen from within the party. Allan thought Labour candidates could be opposed except where this would allow the Conservatives in.

CP Central Committee Minutes, 5/3/38, Reel No.7 (MLHA)

⁷⁰ *North Mail*, 17/3/37, p5; 27/2/37, p5; 2/3/37, p5; *Daily Worker*, 20/3/37, p1 and *Newcastle Journal*, 17/3/37, p3

⁷¹ *Durham Chronicle*, 19/2/37, p4; *North Mail*, 20/2/37, p7; *Daily Worker*, 22/2/37, p5; *Evening Chronicle*, 15/2/37, p1 and 3/3/37, p9

⁷² In the event, Ancrum's candidacy did not lose Labour the seat, which they had held for 15 years. Even had this seat been lost though, Labour control of Durham County Council was so strong that it would have made no difference whatsoever: immediately before the 1937 election, Labour held 80 of the 99 council seats.

North Mail, 16/2/37, p7

⁷³ *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 12/3/37, p5; 16/4/37, p5; *North Mail*, 3/3/37, p7 and 6/4/37, p5

against both Labour and Moderate opposition when defending a seat (at Blyth and Felling). The single exception to this was a by-election in Morpeth in March 1939. Here the Communist J.J. Douglass stood against Moderate and Labour opposition.⁷⁴

Labour did not make any sacrifices for unity at the March 1937 elections. A Labour candidate was absent in the contest for Blyth seat of Northumberland County Council leaving a straight fight between the Communist, Breadin, and a Moderate. However, Labour had decided not to fight the seat due to the strong hold Breadin had on the ward, rather than as a gesture towards unity.⁷⁵ The Communist Richardson's decision to stand down at Houghton-le-Spring appeared to be a unilateral one. In fact, there was conflict between the left parties even when there was no Moderate threat. At Seaham, Burdess and his four Labour opponents were all members of Dawdon lodge executive. Like his Labour counterparts, Burdess was nominated by his lodge which applied for Labour Party political fund money. The Labour Party refused him funding as he was not a party member. Burdess then publicly complained about his treatment, pointing out that he had been chosen by a popular vote and accusing the Labour Party and trade unions of 'dictatorship' which he was 'out to fight and assist to break down'.⁷⁶ Despite receiving some support, Burdess was forced to concede a few days later as he was 'not prepared to allow them [the Labour Party] to dictate what his political opinion should be'.⁷⁷ In this instance the CP was the antagonistic party, unrealistically expecting another political party to fund its campaign against that self-same party.

There was no evidence of a change in attitude within the Labour Party towards co-operation at the polls in autumn 1937 and after, indicating that the Unity Campaign had had no effect in improving relations between the left parties and making the official movement more conducive to the united front. This can be observed at Blyth, both a Labour and, relatively speaking, Communist stronghold, in autumn 1937.⁷⁸ Labour contested a by-election in October 1937 occasioned by the death of the Communist Bob Elliott. There seems to have been no fear in Labour ranks of splitting the left vote. As the seat was Communist, if a concession to unity

⁷⁴ Even with the left vote split, the Labour candidate, Dorothy Robson, won the seat at her seventh attempt and became the first female and first Labour member of Morpeth council.

North Mail, 2/2/39, p7 and 4/3/39, p7

⁷⁵ Breadin won the seat with 935 votes to the Moderate's 502. Apparently, he took his supporters to polling stations in a wheelbarrow.

Daily Worker, 8/3/37, p1

⁷⁶ *Sunderland Echo*, 15/3/37, p5

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 22/3/37, p5

⁷⁸ This was despite the fact that, in March 1937, Blyth TC was uncertain how to deal with the presence of a Communist as Cambois miners' delegate (presumably William Allan) and had to ask Citrine whether the Black Circular was out of date. This suggests that part of the official movement in Blyth was at least not implacably hostile to Communists.

T.A. Brown letter to Citrine, 2/3/37 (WMRC, 292/777.1/5)

was to be made it should have been made, in this instance, by Labour. Indeed, Labour could afford not to contest the seat as its control of Blyth council was very strong.⁷⁹ The fact that Elliott's death fighting fascism in Spain made no difference to Labour's attitude illustrates the party's refusal to contemplate any kind of concession to working class unity.⁸⁰ Despite the Labour attitude, the CP continued attempts to forge unity at the polls. In November 1937, the CP informed Labour that, due to the strong Moderate challenge, they would not field any candidates at the November Municipal elections. At the end of November, two Labour councillors in Croft ward were elected aldermen. In the resultant by-election, the CP supported Labour once more and two Labour candidates were elected. Adhering to this policy, there were no Communist candidates at Blyth in the November 1938 elections.⁸¹ The 'relationship' between the two left parties at the polls in Blyth was very one-sided. Although the CP did not actually sacrifice their two seats in Croft ward for unity, theirs were still positive gestures towards it.⁸² For their part, Labour remained silent and made no obvious concessions.

Labour's reaction, or rather lack of it, to Communist declarations of support was similar in two other municipalities. At Tynemouth, the CP and Labour were almost equally weak. Tynemouth CP announced that it would not field any candidates in the 1937 elections and would instead support Labour candidates, in accordance with the united front. The CP then changed its mind and fielded a candidate in Central ward. There was no Labour candidate in the ward so the united front remained intact, although this is more likely to have been due to Labour's weakness in the municipality rather than a Labour desire to promote unity. There were no Communist candidates at all in Tynemouth in November 1938.⁸³ At South Shields, where Labour was fairly strong, the letters page of the town's newspaper was bombarded by Communists urging people to vote Labour in autumn 1937, but there was no obvious Labour response.⁸⁴ In the November 1938 municipal elections, the only Communist candidate was Anthony Lowther who faced a straight fight with a Moderate in South Shields. Lowther admitted having chosen Bents ward as he did not want to oppose a Labour candidate, although he also thought that he had a chance of victory. In the event, Lowther's optimism was misplaced as he was heavily defeated. The CP supported Labour in all other seats and asked its

⁷⁹ The council complexion after Elliott's death was: 24 Labour, 14 Independents and 1 Communist.

⁸⁰ The Communist William Allan easily won, however, and the CP had two councillors again.

North Mail, 24/8/37, p5

⁸¹ *North Mail*, 2/11/37, p1; 22/11/37, p7; 7/12/37, p3; *Blyth News*, 4/11/37, p1 and 3/11/38, p5

⁸² Both Communist councillors defended their seats in Croft ward in November 1936 and were not due to stand again until November 1939.

⁸³ Communist Alex Robson failed to defeat the Independent in Central ward.

North Mail, 15/10/37, p6; 16/10/37, p7; 22/10/37, p7; 2/11/37, p9; *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/37, p10 and 2/11/38 p9

members to offer their services to Labour candidates. Again, the Labour Party remained silent.⁸⁵ At a by-election at South Shields in January 1939 the CP, despite a number of requests for a Communist candidate, announced that would adhere to their previous policy of supporting Labour nominees. Once more Labour's response was silence.⁸⁶

Elsewhere, Labour reacted with open hostility to Communist offers of support. In east Newcastle, Communists issued pamphlets advising electors to vote Labour. Then, a few weeks before the election, the CP wrote to Labour offering co-operation in the elections. The offer was not acted upon. B.A. Brenan (secretary of Newcastle East Labour Party) was then approached by a Communist official offering help in the final stages of the election campaign. Brenan declined the offer and publicly renounced association with Communists in the press. Other Labour Party members echoed this.⁸⁷ Events in Sunderland mirrored Newcastle. A CP leaflet supporting Labour in the October 1937 election was publicly repudiated by alderman George Ford (secretary and agent of Sunderland DLP) who stated that proposed Communist meetings to support Labour candidates would be 'distinctly harmful to our cause. People would infer that we are seeking the assistance of the Communists, which is not the case'.⁸⁸ The *North Mail* commented that Communists 'embarrass the Socialists by their flattery, for praise from the reds of the Socialist policy in Sunderland is a telling indictment of that policy in the minds of a large number of electors'.⁸⁹

Was the Labour Party in Newcastle and Sunderland right to fear that Communist support would lose them votes?⁹⁰ Fenner Brockway (ILP general secretary) argued that the help of ILP and CP members for Labour candidates was of 'considerable value'.⁹¹ Historians

⁸⁴ *Shields Gazette*, 15/10/37, p8; 23/10/37, p4; 25/10/37, p4; 26/10/37, p4 and 27/10/37, p4

⁸⁵ Why Labour did not field a candidate in Bents ward was something of a mystery. A pre-election report stated that few of the 3,322 voters in the ward were either Communists or Conservatives and thus a dull election with a 40% turnout and a Moderate victory was predicted. The constituency, Moderate since it was formed in 1901, included several hundred miners and it was predicted that, due to the lack of a Labour candidate, most of them would not bother to vote. Most working class voters in the ward apparently thought that Labour had made a mistake in not fielding a candidate.

Shields Gazette, 20/10/38, p5; 25/10/38, p3; 2/11/38, p1; *Daily Worker*, 31/10/38, p5 and *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/38, p9

⁸⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 16/1/39, p3

⁸⁷ *North Mail*, 29/10/37, p11 and *Sunday Sun*, 31/10/37, p11

⁸⁸ *North Mail*, 30/10/37, p5

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p6

⁹⁰ This reflected the attitudes of national Labour figures such as Attlee who thought that association with the CP would cost Labour one million votes.

J. Swift, 'Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40', Ph.D. Thesis, Lancaster University (1997) p274

⁹¹ F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p237

He criticised 'faint hearts' in the Labour Party who argued that association with Communists would frighten timid voters away: 'Even if this were so, Labour Party victories on the basis of timid votes would be of little working-class value' (p237).

have disagreed on the question. John Campbell thought that the CP could only damage Labour electorally and John Swift agreed.⁹² Conversely, Noreen Branson claimed that Labour 'reaped the benefit' of Communist support at local elections but, as an ex-Communist, this is not surprising.⁹³ Ostensibly less partisan, Roger Eatwell argued that Communist support for Labour candidates in local elections normally either benefited Labour or had no effect.⁹⁴ As Communist overtures were rebuffed in the north east, an assessment of the effect of Communist assistance for Labour candidates is difficult. Certainly, given the attitude of the regional press, Labour's enemies to the right would have made the very most of any obvious co-operation between the parties at local elections (as occurred when the DMA invited Communists to its anti-Means Test demonstrations in August 1936). Whether Communist support would have helped or hindered Labour, the salient point is that the general feeling within the official north east labour movement was that being associated with Communism would hinder Labour's cause, and therefore Communist aid was rejected.

Yet, even without co-operating, Labour benefited at the polls from the CP's united front policy in one north east council. Blyth CP's unilateral refusal to field candidates against Labour, in order to preserve the united front, certainly ensured Labour retained one or two seats. The Communist decision not to contest the 1937 municipal elections was prescient as even without its candidates, an Independent unseated the sitting Labour councillor. This shock result was caused by the presence of A. Critchley, a 'Worker's Candidate' not connected with the CP, who had been predicted a likely victor beforehand. Although Critchley came last, he still split the left vote sufficiently to allow the Independent victory. Similarly, at the Croft ward by-election in late November 1937, the Labour majority was very narrow (only 28) and a Communist candidate could have drastically altered the result.⁹⁵ In Croft ward at least, the absence of Communist candidates (and perhaps even their support) certainly helped Labour. The problem for the CP was that it only had this level of influence in one ward of a council which Labour dominated. Thus the absence of Communist candidates merely strengthened Labour's very strong hold on the municipality. As in Durham County Council and many UDCs in the region, Labour could safely ignore Communist overtures without risking its grip on power. One or two Labour councillors owed their seats to Communists in Blyth but that was it. Blyth Labour benefited from Communist sacrifices without feeling indebted and without

⁹² J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987) p74 and J. Swift, op cit., p277

⁹³ N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p146

⁹⁴ R. Eatwell, op cit., p209

⁹⁵ *North Mail*, 2/11/37, p1; 22/11/37, p7; 7/12/37, p3; *Blyth News*, 4/11/37, p1

needing to reciprocate. Moreover, Croft ward in Blyth was the only place in the north east where the CP had sufficient influence to be able to make a difference in local elections. Elsewhere, Communist intervention in elections did not really effect the outcome. In addition, as discussed in chapter two, the fact that Labour only had a tenuous hold on a council did not prevent many local Labour Parties from splitting with devastating electoral results. Thus, even had Communist support at the polls been vital for Labour to retain control of a council, it is unlikely that co-operation would have occurred unless the Labour Party involved was *ideologically committed* to the united front. In other words, practical necessity alone was never going to force Labour in the north east into co-operation with Communists, regardless of what they had to offer. This point is reinforced by the Labour Party's attitude where Communists had real influence. In South Wales, for example, Labour refused even to discuss offers of help at the municipal polls from Rhondda CP, despite the fact that the Communists had polled 37.4% of the vote in West Rhondda in the 1935 general election.⁹⁶ As it was, Communists had nothing to offer Labour in the region outside of Croft ward. This had important implications for the popular front too. One argument against the involvement of Communists in a popular front was that the party had no voting strength to bring to an alliance. This was certainly the case for the north east.

The ILP fielded candidates for two councils in the region, 1937-1939. Brockway argued that the ILP should work with Labour in the localities and that there should be no conflicting candidatures at elections.⁹⁷ Yet, the autonomy ILP branches enjoyed in election policy militated against the united front in the north east.⁹⁸ As discussed in chapter two, Jarrow ILP branch was established by a breakaway group of Labour Party members who stood in wards against both Labour and Moderate candidates. The same was true at Ashington. In April 1937, the ILP fielded Charles Cole for Ashington UDC against Labour and Independent opposition in a two seat ward. One Labour candidate topped the poll, but an Independent was elected in second place. It is conceivable that had Cole not stood, both Labour candidates would have been elected. Either way, as with the elections for Durham County Council and Felling UDC, the result was not of major significance given the fact that Labour and the Co-

⁹⁶ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, p209

⁹⁷ F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p236

⁹⁸ A resolution to ILP conference in 1937 indicated that this autonomy continued. The resolution intended to clarify the 'chaotic' situation, proposing to make obligatory 'critical support' of 'working class candidates' where there was a risk of splitting the 'working class vote' to the advantage of an 'anti-working class' candidate.

ILP Agenda and Reports, 1937 (BLPES, ILP/5/1937/7)

operative Party jointly dominated the council.⁹⁹ There were no ILP candidates in November 1938 as their challenge had evaporated with the rapprochement in Jarrow. Yet, where the ILP had been able to pose an electoral challenge, it did so regardless of splitting the left vote. The Unity Campaign had not even convinced the ILP, one of the parties involved in it, to attempt co-operation with Labour at the polls. This suggests there was some opposition within the ILP to the united front. However, given the unusual circumstances in which it came into being, too much significance should not be attached to Jarrow ILP's behaviour. Jarrow ILP members were particularly bitter at their erstwhile Labour comrades, and thus understandably antagonistic towards them. On the other hand, Ashington ILP's electoral policy does suggest little ILP regard for the united front at the polls.

Overall, only the CP attempted to build co-operation on the left at the polls between 1937-1939 and met either indifference or public rejection from Labour. There was no correlation between the strength of Labour in a given municipality and its decision to remain silent or publicly renounce the CP. This contrasted with parts of West Yorkshire: Communists in Leeds and Huddersfield helped Labour. In the 1937 municipal elections in Leeds, five Labour Party ward committees defied their leaders and allowed Communists to work secretly for them. Perhaps the difference in Labour's attitude was due to the fact that in Yorkshire Communists did not offer their help publicly and therefore their support could not be used by the press to discredit Labour.¹⁰⁰ In the north east, the ILP was equally unmoved by the idea of not splitting the left vote. The Unity Campaign had no effect whatsoever in the region: the CP had tried (and failed) to stimulate co-operation before 1937 and the attitudes of Labour and the ILP remained unaltered. Yet even some Communist candidates split the left vote when defending a seat, and, on one occasion, when attempting to take a seat. Burdess' behaviour at Seaham in spring 1937 was also hardly likely to stimulate trust and co-operation with Labour. Ultimately, no left party was fully committed to the united front at the polls in the late thirties and the Unity Campaign had done nothing to change that.

The Spanish Civil War (I): Spanish Medical Aid Committees

The Spanish civil war stimulated some united front activity in 1937-1939 between Communists and Labour Party members, though this was not obviously linked with the Unity

⁹⁹ *Evening Chronicle*, 6/4/37, p8; *North Mail*, 6/4/37, p5 and ILP NAC Minutes, 13 and 14/11/37 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/13)

The composition of Ashington council was: 17 Labour and Co-operative Party and 4 Moderates. *Newcastle Chronicle*, 6/4/37, p11

¹⁰⁰ Curiously, Murphy criticised Communist sectarianism in West Yorkshire which meant that the party squandered an opportunity to build the united front with Labour at the municipal elections in 1937, despite the fact that he himself noted the co-operation that occurred in two important cities.

Campaign (excepting the specific Unity Campaign meetings on Spain). The united front activity came in two main forms; within some Spanish Medical Aid Committees (SMAC) and with Communist members of the International Brigade (IB). As noted in chapter one, four local SMACs were established in the months preceding the Unity Campaign and one, Blaydon, appeared to be a united front. Of the possibly seventeen SMACs in the north east, three took on the appearance of united fronts, although the balance of left forces in each varied.¹⁰¹

Blaydon SMAC was dominated by official Labour with a Communist in the background. The balance of left parties seems to have been reversed in the case of South Shields SMAC. The idea of establishing a SMAC in the town was mooted in January 1937 at a Communist meeting in Marsden Miners Hall. Isobel Brown, the Communist from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) addressed a South Shields SMAC meeting in February 1937 which was chaired by William Wilson, secretary of Boldon lodge. Wilson was a likely Communist sympathiser if not an actual Communist as he was also an NUWM member. Will Pearson, supporting the committee's aims, appealed for unity of working class forces. The appeal for support issued by the SMAC was signed by Labour and Independent socialist councillors, members of several miners lodges, Boldon Colliery Labour Party and S.H. Fominson of the TJPC. The prominent role the CP played in the SMAC is underscored by the fact that its secretary in 1938, M. Hoy, was also secretary of South Shields CP.¹⁰² It is possible that New Herrington and District SMAC was also a united front. It was organised by Ryhope colliery Labour women's section and members of Ryhope miners' lodge which had a Communist in its executive.¹⁰³ However, as there is no evidence of precisely which members of the lodge were involved, it is impossible to be certain.

If these three SMACs were united fronts (albeit without the ILP), why were the Labour Party members involved in them not disciplined for co-operating with Communists? That none of the Labour activists in the united front committees lost their official positions during the late thirties can be explained, perhaps, by the fact that the individuals involved generally held important official positions. Consequently, there was no one more elevated in the local

D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp318-322 and 330

¹⁰¹ Murphy claimed that in most West Yorkshire towns the CP was at forefront of creating 'Aid-For-Spain' committees but did not discuss their composition nor their politics and the implications this had for the united front.

Ibid., p320

¹⁰² Of course, Wilson could have been an ILP or Labour Party member.

Shields Gazette, 23/9/36, p4; 25/9/36, p7; 22/2/37, p1; 26/2/37, p7; 10/3/39, p8 and *North Mail*, 18/1/37, p7

¹⁰³ In 1930 Ryhope lodge had been involved in the Communist inspired Miner's Minority movement. In the later thirties the lodge was involved in other left wing/Communist causes. For example, in February 1938, Ryhope colliery band headed a Communist political pageant in Sunderland.

The Worker, 28/11/30, p1; *North Mail*, 23/6/37, p5 and 4/2/38, p1

hierarchy to discipline them. This was particularly true in Blaydon Labour Party. Discipline could only have come from the NEC, perhaps too preoccupied with keeping its high profile members such as Ellen Wilkinson in line to weed out every single local party member co-operating with Communists. As seen in chapter one, Citrine was very keen to scrutinise the activities of trade unionists at all levels. Perhaps, had the activities of individuals *as Labour Party members rather than as trade unionists* come under his remit, there would have been more disciplinary action taken against Labour Party members obviously co-operating with Communists. However, even then it was often not obvious that Communists *were* involved. In Blaydon SMAC, for example, Wilf Jobling was a behind-the-scenes operator rather than a committee official. Had he not been killed in Spain and a tribute written to him by Steve Lawther, it is likely that his pivotal role in the SMAC would have remained unknown.¹⁰⁴ The difficulties the historian encounters when attempting to identify probable Communists from the sources underscores the problem. This was recognised by a contemporary. Commenting on Chopwell, Jim Stephenson said that Communists 'were absorbed into the general scheme of things [...] and I should think you would have been a very clever man to distinguish a Communist from an ordinary [sic.] individual'.¹⁰⁵ As in West Yorkshire, there was also a degree of tolerance from other local Labour leaders who turned a blind eye to their members co-operating with Communists, due to mutual respect.¹⁰⁶ This kind of covert activity was not likely to lose Labour votes and disciplining dissenters was probably more trouble than it was worth.

That united front activity around Spain was distinctly limited in the north east can be illustrated by comparison with South Wales where such activity was more extensive. The South Wales Council for Spanish Aid (SWCSA) was called for by the CP in December 1936 and finally established formally in February 1937 at a joint meeting of Cardiff TC and SWMF. Its objective was the ending of non-intervention, the first step being to pressurise the Labour

¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely Jobling was deliberately hidden from view in the Blaydon SMAC due to fears of NEC discipline. Lawther was happy to appear, for example, on a joint Labour-Communist platform in April 1938 (mentioned below), giving the NEC the perfect excuse to expel him had it desired. Lawther's consistent appearances with Communists in this period seem to have incurred no disciplinary measures. Perhaps the expulsion of Steve Lawther, the brother of Will (who became president of the MFGB in 1939), would have been more embarrassing than retaining him in the party. Lawther's case, and that of several other left-wingers in the north east reveals how inconsistent Labour discipline was: iron-fisted for some, non-existent for others. Generally, though, the north east labour movement was tolerant of its heretics in this period. The region was not exceptional in this respect. There was, for example, general tolerance of Communists in most sections of the East Midlands labour movement too.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., p239

¹⁰⁵ J. Adamson, 'A Comment by James Stephenson of Winlaton', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.4 (1970) p29

¹⁰⁶ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p333

Party to hold an emergency conference. There was no north east equivalent of this organisation as the DMA, whilst donating to funds for the Republic, did not involve itself further. However, in South Wales too, the 'Aid Spain' campaigns began to reflect the tensions which saw an end to the united front in 1937. The SWCSA was increasingly by-passed by the official labour movement and in February 1938 all official organisations were told to break off associations with 'Aid Spain' committees. 'All-in' demonstrations were still held but, whilst these were tolerated, organisational involvement was 'frowned upon'.¹⁰⁷ There was no attempt to resurrect 'unity' until the popular front campaign.

United front activity in north east SMACs was limited in three ways. Firstly, it was very small in numerical terms. At least six other SMACs, double the number of united front committees, seem to have been wholly official labour movement affairs in terms of personnel.¹⁰⁸ Four others took on the appearance of popular fronts.¹⁰⁹ Secondly, there appears to have been no ILP involvement in SMACs in the north east. This contrasts with South Wales where, for example, Neath Spanish Aid committee included ILP, CP, trades council members and even Anarchists.¹¹⁰ However, even in South Wales the 'quasi popular frontism' of the committees was ultimately attacked by many ILP members and 'only a few were active in Spanish Aid work'.¹¹¹ Apart from its own fund raising efforts, the only 'Aid Spain' campaign which involved the north east ILP was the management committee of the Basque refugee children's hostel at Tynemouth. Even this humanitarian activity caused friction on the left. In January 1938 Gateshead ILP wrote to Gateshead Labour Party complaining about a report in the *Gateshead Labour Herald*, of an ILP-organised Christmas party for the Basque children. The ILP supplied a 'correct report', but the editor, on publishing it, noted that she could not see the difference between the ILP version and their own.¹¹² The closest the ILP had come to united front co-operation on Spain had occurred in late 1936 when Gateshead ILP helped

¹⁰⁷ H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1984) p132

¹⁰⁸ These were Gateshead, Stanley, Wallsend, Felling, Durham and Ashington SMACs.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 12/36, p4; 2/37, p1; *North Mail*, 6/2/37, p4; 7/5/37, p6; 5/7/37, p3; *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 16/4/37, p5; 14/5/37, p3; 1/6/37, p8; 17/9/37, p6; *Durham Chronicle*, 29/1/37, p10; 19/3/37, p8; 11/6/37, p8; 16/7/37, p8; 23/7/37, p8 and 30/7/37, p6

¹⁰⁹ These were Newcastle, North Shields, Sunderland and Seaham SMACs. These and the campaigns to support the *Linaria* men, the Basque refugees at Tynemouth Hostel and the British Youth Foodship Campaign are discussed in connection with the Tyneside Foodship campaign in chapter eight. There is insufficient information on the other four SMACs (Bishop Auckland, Willington, Chester-le-Street and Morpeth), to determine how they were constituted.

Bishop Auckland Labour Party Women's Section Minutes, 2/12/37 (DRO, D/BAL/1/1); Brancepeth No.2 Lodge Minutes, 20/4/39 (DRO, D/DMA/326/9); *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 19/3/37, p3 and *North Mail*, 11/9/37, p7

¹¹⁰ There do not appear to have been any Anarchists active in the north east in this period.

¹¹¹ Communists and Labour Party members continued to work together on these committees.
H. Francis, op cit., p120

organise the conference that established the Newcastle SMAC and later established a propaganda committee with the Socialist League. Finally, the localities and individuals concerned provide few surprises. Apart from Newcastle and Gateshead (which invariably provided the venues for events which drew support from the whole region), Blaydon was the only locality to consistently produce evidence of united front activity between Communists and Labour throughout this period. Thus Blaydon SMAC was a natural development on the left and not an aberration or evidence suggesting that the conflict in Spain heralded a new era of co-operation between the official labour movement and Communists in the area. South Shields SMAC is notable because, as discussed below, there is evidence of Labour hostility towards Communists. Yet this committee only secured the support of a handful of Labour councillors and these were largely the Independent Socialists and left-wingers such as Pearson (who was involved in the Unity Campaign). Most of the important South Shields Labour activists were notable by their absence.¹¹³ Overall, united front activity within SMACs was very limited in the north east; to certain left wingers in a handful of localities.

The Spanish Civil War (II): International Brigades

The Communist Party in Britain, like its foreign counterparts, recruited volunteers to fight in its International Brigade (IB) to support the Spanish Republic militarily. In total around 2,500 people volunteered from Britain.¹¹⁴ At least 103 people from the north east fought in the IB or volunteered for the Spanish medical services. Of these approximately 33% were CP and 12% Labour Party members.¹¹⁵ Many of the Communist volunteers found that their status afforded opportunities for the promotion of the united front as IB membership gave them access to official labour movement platforms. This was the most important (in terms of numbers) of the very few ways in which Communists could access the platforms of moderate north east Labour Parties in this period.¹¹⁶

¹¹² *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 1/38, p7 and 2/38, p7

¹¹³ This is not to say the South Shields LP&TC was inactive on the issue of Spain. It held many large meetings on the issue but for the most part eschewed activity with the SMAC.

¹¹⁴ See W. Rust, *Britons in Spain* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1939); B. Alexander, *British Volunteers For Liberty. Spain, 1936-1939* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1982) and J.K. Hopkins, *Into the Heart of the Fire. The British in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998)

¹¹⁵ This figure does not include Teesside. This information is taken from an article I am preparing dealing specifically with the north east contingent of the IB.

¹¹⁶ It is possible that Communist accessed Labour platforms through the TJPC. A 'W. Allen' spoke under TJPC auspices at an official labour movement Mayday demonstration on Newcastle Town Moor in 1937. This was possibly William Allan, the Blyth Communist who was involved in the TJPC. If this was the Communist, he was speaking in a capacity other than that of a Communist councillor. (Although, presumably, at least a portion of his audience must have known that he was a Communist councillor). Moreover, this is the *only* example of a known Communist sharing a platform in a Labour-organised event in the region in 1937 and after, outside of the 'Aid Spain' activities. Though the TJPC was involved in organising the Mayday 1938 demonstrations in Newcastle, all the speakers were from the official movement.

Several Communist IB volunteers spoke on platforms with Labour Party members in the north east. In April 1937 the Sunderland Communist Frank Graham was one of four representatives from Spain sent to 'answer lies about the [Spanish] war in the English gutter press'.¹¹⁷ In the month of his speaking tour, Graham addressed between 50 and 60 meetings including those of trades unions, miners' lodges, Co-operative guilds and local Labour Parties. He claimed that he received strong support, very few hostile questions and was never heckled. Graham often shared the platform with Labour figures such as Susan Lawrence of the NEC and Sam Watson. At Thornley, for example, he spoke under the auspices of the local Labour Party along with other local Labour leaders.¹¹⁸ The following year, George Aitken, who had become a Lieutenant Colonel in the IB, spoke at official labour movement Mayday meetings in Blaydon and Highfield.¹¹⁹ Aitken also spoke at Blyth, making pleas for 'united front action' by the workers, which were supported by Labour councillor John Mordue.¹²⁰ Other Communist IB members also accessed Labour platforms. George Coyle spoke at a South Shields Labour Party Mayday meeting.¹²¹ A month later, Nathan Gill spoke at a Spanish aid demonstration organised by Houghton-le-Spring DLP. The MP, W.J. Stewart, and other Labour figures also addressed the meeting.¹²²

Being an IB member also gave some Communists influence on trade union policy. In April 1938 the NMA executive received a deputation of wounded IB volunteers and relatives of those killed in Spain timed to coincide with the receiving of votes on a proposal to send £100 to Asturian miners.¹²³ The deputation, aiming to get the union to do more, convinced the

North Mail, 3/5/37, p10 and 30/4/38, p7

¹¹⁷ F. Graham, *The Battle of Jarama* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1987) p27

¹¹⁸ Graham also addressed church meetings, two Conservative Associations and meetings of businessmen and obtained support on the platform from 'several' members of the local clergy. Unfortunately it is uncertain precisely which Conservative Associations were addressed. As Frank Graham was the north of England representative, it is conceivable that many of these meetings, including the Conservative ones, were outside of the north east. (The three other representatives were for London, Scotland and Wales).

Frank Graham Interview, 21/10/94; Frank Graham letter to Harry Pollitt, 16/4/36 (presumably a mistake for 1937) (MLHA, CP/IND/POLL/2/6); Frank Graham Interview (IWM Sound Archive, 11877/6); *North Mail*, 10/4/37, p7; *Durham Chronicle*, 7/5/37, p5 and F. Graham, op cit., p27

¹¹⁹ *Blaydon Courier*, 13/5/38, p1

¹²⁰ *North Mail*, 2/5/38, p5

¹²¹ *Shields Gazette*, 2/5/38, p1; George Coyle autobiography (MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/2/01) and List of International Brigaders (including addresses and political affiliations), n.d. (MML, D7/A/2)

The Mayday 1938 demonstration at Throckley, organised by a sub-committee of Wansbeck DLP, also proposed to include an unnamed wounded IB speaker.

Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 16/4/38 (NRON, 527/A/3)

¹²² Gill was not the only Communist on the platform, as Nell Badsey spoke about the Tynemouth Basque Children's hostel.

Durham Chronicle, 3/6/38, p6 and 10/6/38, p10

¹²³ In February 1938, the NMA donated £10 to the IB Dependants' Aid Campaign to 'help ensure a victory for the democratic forces in Spain'.

EC meeting, 16/2/38, NMA AR, 1938 (NRON, 759/68)

executive to support their suggestion of a joint north east labour movement conference which they hoped would urge the government to allow the Republic to buy arms. It also convinced the executive to allow an IB speaker at its Mayday meeting. At least three and possibly all four of the IB members on the delegation were Communists.¹²⁴ Presumably this was the same conference that the NEFTC decided to call with the NTFLP, trade union branches, district committees and Co-operative Parties in May 1938 to consider the international situation and devise means to remove the government from office. The conference, held in June, called for a national labour movement conference on the topic (see chapter five).¹²⁵

The deaths in action of Communist IB volunteers also seemed to promote the united front. For example, a memorial meeting for Wilf Jobling after his death at Jarama in February 1937 united Labour and Communist on the platform.¹²⁶ Some Labour Party members eulogised the Communist combatants. For example, Henry Bolton paid a tribute to Jobling in a session of Blaydon council, which he chaired.¹²⁷ The individuals also drew praise from Labour Party publications. The *Gateshead Labour Herald* published a glowing tribute to Jobling, and all other IB members: 'If this flame that burns within these fighters could sweep the ranks of youth, we would win the world'.¹²⁸ Similarly, the death of councillor Bob Elliott drew accolades from Labour Party members. At a memorial meeting for Elliott organised by Blyth branch of ASLEF, tributes to him were received from, among others, R.J. Taylor the Labour MP. At another Elliott tribute meeting two months later, the Labour mayor alderman Reilly presided with speeches from Taylor, representatives of Blyth TC and Labour Party and Allan of Blyth CP.¹²⁹

The return home of IB members after the Republic withdrew them from the conflict in autumn 1938 provided occasions for further united front activity. With fellow Communists on the platform, Frank Graham spoke at a 'welcome home' celebration in Gateshead on 3 December 1938. The DMA sent an agent and two executive members to the meeting and Will Lawther and mayor Pickering sent letters of regret. Another group of north east IB volunteers was welcomed by the president of the NMA, Arthur Blenkinsop and Lyall Wilkes (the Labour

¹²⁴ John Henderson, George Shields and Bob Quail were the definite Communists. Joseph Holland was the possible Communist.

List of International Brigaders, n.d. (MML, D7/A/2) and D. Watson, 'Bobbie Qualie, 1909-1982', *North East Labour History*, Vol.30 (1996) pp66-67

¹²⁵ The DCFLP, which was also included in the NMA resolution, was not mentioned in any newspaper report, so it is uncertain if it was involved.

EC meeting, 11/4/38, NMA AR, 1938 (NROM, 759/68), *North Mail*, 12/4/38, p4; 16/5/38, p10 and 20/6/38, p7

¹²⁶ *North Mail*, 12/4/37, p1 and *Blaydon Courier*, 17/4/37, p5

¹²⁷ *Blaydon Courier*, 20/3/37, p24

¹²⁸ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 4/37, p7

¹²⁹ *North Mail*, 26/7/37, p7; 10/9/37, p1 and 13/9/37, p7

PPCs for East and Central Newcastle) and representatives of the AEU district committee and the SMAC. Pickering was to give a reception. At the memorial meeting for all north east IB volunteers on 15 January 1939, C.P. Trevelyan spoke, as did Will Lawther, Hamilton Fyfe of *Reynolds News*, the NJCSR Communist Isobel Brown and Frank Graham. At the Sunderland IB memorial meeting in late March 1939 Graham again spoke, appearing on the platform with two local Labour PPCs. 'Welcome home' meetings for individual IB volunteers were similar.¹³⁰ In fact, Frank Graham, on his return from Spain, was also present on the platforms of other campaigns. He appeared on Tyneside foodship campaign platforms and provided the obvious Communist presence in the campaign (see chapter eight). He also addressed at least one 'political' Labour meeting, at a 'Save Spain rally' organised by Monkwearmouth and colliery Labour Party and Wearmouth lodge in late January 1939. Along with him were the Labour Party PPC for Sunderland and Joshua Ritson MP.¹³¹

This evidence suggests that some advances were made in building a united front by means of Communist organisation of the IB. John Mordue's support for Aitken's call for united front action in May 1938 is significant as he opposed CP affiliation to Labour in 1936 and had experienced bad relations with Blyth Communists since then.¹³² Yet it is unclear whether Mordue had changed his mind about working class unity at this point, or whether he still saw it in terms of the working class joining the Labour Party (a viewpoint which he expressed in the 1937 MFGB conference, discussed above). Unfortunately, there is no evidence of his attitudes towards Communists and the united front after this time. Another possibly significant occurrence was the presence of a Communist IB member on the platform of the moderate Houghton-le-Spring DLP.

However, several considerations temper these minor positive developments. The support that prominent IB Communists received when killed in action should not be over-emphasised. The presence of moderate Labour figures in these memorial meetings did not necessarily indicate support for Communist ideology and methods. Before the first Elliott memorial meeting, mayor Reilly had been clear that; 'While I did not agree with his [Elliott's]

¹³⁰ The presence of the CAPR gave some of these meetings more of a popular front appearance. *North Mail*, 5/12/38, p5; 16/1/39, p1; *Newcastle Journal*, 16/1/39, p3; *Shields Gazette*, 31/12/38, p5; *Daily Worker*, 10/12/38, p1; newspaper articles (MML, BoxB-4M/5d and M/5e); Bill advertising memorial meeting, 31/3/39 (MML, BoxB-4M/7) and F. Graham, op cit., pp36, 74-6

¹³¹ Bill advertising 'Save Spain rally', 27/1/39 (MML, BoxB-4M/6) and Frank Graham Papers (MML, BoxA12/Gr/8)

¹³² For example, Mordue clashed with Blyth Communist councillors in February 1937 when defending the council's proposal to spend £570 on the coronation celebrations. Mordue argued that, if there were no celebrations, there 'would be a revolution among the people [sic.] that they, as socialists, were supposed to represent'.

Newcastle Journal, 12/2/37, p14

politics in the main, I certainly admired the way in which he put forward his view, for which he fought and died'.¹³³ It is, of course, traditional for politicians of all political persuasions to say something pleasant about a colleague on the event of their death, especially if it was untimely. As noted above, when it came to replacing Elliott in the council, Labour did not hesitate to field a candidate against the Communist.

Many of the Labour figures sharing platforms with Communists, or eulogising Communists killed in Spain, were to be expected. The *Gateshead Labour Herald* tribute to Jobling was signed 'A.H.' This was probably the left winger Allan Henderson who had been an ILP member until 1935. The left wing Steve Lawther's name was not surprising in this context, and neither was his brother Will's. They had lost their youngest brother Clifford, who had been killed at Jarama in February 1937.¹³⁴ The other Labour figure who spoke at the Jobling meeting, Joe Armstrong, was also predictable. Both Armstrong and Steve Lawther had worked with Jobling in Blaydon SMAC and perhaps also in the Socialist Sunday School (Jobling was certainly a product of the school). Their presence at the Jobling meeting was not a significant coup for the united front and neither was Aitken's presence on platforms in the Blaydon area (Steve Lawther's party). Bolton was, as noted before, also active in united front activity. The names of Arthur Blenkinsop and Lyall Wilkes, both about to embroil themselves in the Cripps controversy, were also not out of place in this context, nor was Charles Trevelyan and his DLP, Wansbeck. As mentioned above, Pickering openly praised Communists in 1938.

The crucial feature of Communist IB members' appearances on Labour platforms was that they were always billed as IB soldiers rather than as Communists. Thus the presence of an IB member at the South Shields Labour Party organised Mayday meeting in 1938 was consistent with its refusals to co-operate with Communists in March 1938 (as discussed below): the united front on the platform was implicit rather than explicit and known only to those who knew the politics of the specific IB member involved. K.W. Watkins claimed that none of the national Labour Party leaders who spoke on the platform of the International Brigade Dependant's Aid Committee and who visited the fighters in Spain 'can have been unaware, no one was, of the Communist inspiration of the Brigade or of the Communist inspiration of the Dependents' Aid Committee [...]'.¹³⁵ Whilst this was probably true of the

¹³³ *Daily Worker*, 3/9/37, p4

¹³⁴ Will Lawther initially supported non-intervention in Spain.

TUC AR, 1936 p370 and T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) p66

¹³⁵ K.W. Watkins, *Britain Divided. The Effect of the Spanish Civil War on British Political Opinion* (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1963) p184

leaders, it is conceivable that many grass roots Labour Party members *did not know* that Communists were behind the IB effort in Britain. And even if they did, they did not know the political affiliations of individual IB speakers, several of whom *were not* Communists. The point was to have a speaker present who had first-hand knowledge of the situation in Spain, the political affiliation of that person was of no real consequence. Thus, as Communists possibly accessed Labour platforms as TJPC members, other Communists did so by virtue of membership of the IB. But, as they were not explicitly billed as Communists, it is conceivable that their party gained little or no political benefit from their activities. The fact that the moderate Houghton-le-Spring DLP had had a Communist IB speaker on its public platform did not indicate a change in its political outlook, nor did it provoke one. The party no more openly supported association with the CP, or Communist causes like the popular front, after having had a Communist speaker on its platform than it had before. Of course, the fact that the CP was organising the British IB effort must have had a positive impact on the thinking of many of the rank-and-file Labour Party members who knew this, but this would have happened regardless of whether IB fighters appeared on Labour platforms or not.

Likewise, it is possible that the NMA executive did not know that the deputation it received was largely or totally Communist. None of the Communists involved were councillors or prominent in the local newspapers. In fact, most of these individuals can only be identified as Communists from internal lists in the IB archive (and other sources such as oral interviews which were not available at the time). Though the deputation achieved what it set out to do, it ultimately had no effect.¹³⁶ The resolution passed by the north east labour movement conference on Spain in June 1938 calling for a national emergency conference on the issue was, like every other similar resolution the NEC and TUC received in 1938, ignored (see chapter five).¹³⁷ In fact, the conference did not even institute a campaign to aid the Spanish Republic: it discussed sending a food and medical supply ship from the Tyne but nothing concrete occurred. Even then, Communist involvement in the Tyneside foodship campaign (which, coming six months after this conference was not a result of it), did not bring the party any obvious benefits (see chapter eight).

¹³⁶ It was also a little unfair to suggest, as the delegation had, that the NMA had been inactive before receiving the IB delegation. In fact, it had called for a national labour movement conference on the international situation in mid-March, before it received the deputation. When Transport House refused to act, it pushed the idea within the MFGB (see chapter five).

¹³⁷ T. Buchanan, *op cit.*, pp107-136

The Spanish Civil War and the Unity Campaign

Little of the limited united front activity around Spain can be obviously attributed to the effects of the Unity Campaign, although it is impossible to be categorical. As IB volunteers were not billed as Communists, the question of whether the Unity Campaign made local Labour Parties more amenable to having Communists as speakers is redundant. However, it can be observed that the Unity Campaign did not seem to play a major part in the formation of united front SMACs. The formation of Blaydon SMAC was not influenced by the Unity Campaign as it preceded it by a week. The Unity Campaign capitalised on, rather than created, the good relations between Communists and Labour in Blaydon. Four SMACs existed before the Unity Campaign began; thus it is likely that it was simply chance that saw the creation of two united front SMACs after the campaign began. Arguably, their creation was stimulated as much or more by previous SMACs than by the Unity Campaign itself. Given that only three of seventeen SMACs seem to have been united fronts, the Unity Campaign could not have had a major effect on stimulating united front activity within the SMACs. Moreover, the campaign did not even convince the ILP of the need to involve itself in the SMACs. The ILP's only involvement with other political organisations in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns was on an humanitarian basis in Tynemouth Basque refugee hostel.

In fact, the Unity Campaign, as nationally, was not able to mitigate the stresses placed on relations between the ILP and CP that occurred as a result of the deteriorating political situation in Republican Spain. North east ILP involvement in a united front conference on Spain in September 1936 and a handful of meetings on Spain linked with the early months of the Unity Campaign were isolated examples of CP and ILP co-operation around Spain. Tensions in Spain between the Republican parties, especially the Communists and the POUM, the ILP's sister party, were reflected in tensions at national level in the Unity Campaign and it eventually fell apart in summer 1937.¹³⁸ In South Wales there was bitter controversy between the ILP and CP over the suppression of the POUM and a similar process occurred in the north east.¹³⁹ Relations between the ILP and CP became so bad that, at an ILP open air meeting in September 1938 (at the height of the Munich crisis) in Sunderland, Communists asked the ILP speaker, John McNair, why he had given money to Franco: 'John went for them and at the end

¹³⁸ In fact, this was the first of three reasons Brockway gave for the failure of the Unity Campaign.

F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p224

¹³⁹ H. Francis *op cit.*, p114

There were 'scarcely any repercussions' of the Maydays in Birmingham political circles.

P.D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's Response to the Spanish Civil War With Particular Reference to the Labour Movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, Birmingham University (1977) p245

they apologised and said they had been misinformed'.¹⁴⁰ The issue of the popular front itself also provoked division, as the ILP was opposed to it. On the same speaking tour, at a meeting at Westfield Hall, McNair was heckled by some 'popular fronters' (presumably Communists).¹⁴¹ The ILP, prominent in anti-fascist activities and often present on joint platforms with the CP and Labour Party in the early thirties in the north east, retreated into isolation after early 1937.¹⁴² There was no ILP presence on joint political platforms on Spain after early 1937 in the region.

Relations between the ILP and the Labour left in Gateshead followed a similar pattern. There was some co-operation between the ILP and Socialist League on Spain in the early months of the Unity Campaign. In mid-February 1937, for example, Gateshead ILP and Socialist League jointly organised a film show for Spain.¹⁴³ However, this co-operation was not a success for the Unity Campaign as the two parties had organised joint meetings on Spain in December 1936.¹⁴⁴ In addition, the Unity Campaign and the co-operation over Spain failed to prevent a serious deterioration in relations between the Labour left and ILP in Gateshead. Conflict between Gateshead ILP and Gateshead Socialist Society (GSS), the successor to Gateshead Socialist League, arose not over ideological differences but rather over the practical problems related to their shared premises, Westfield Hall. A joint management committee of the ILP and Socialist League had run the hall, the old ILP building, from 1932.¹⁴⁵ This arrangement had caused problems before 1937, chiefly over the ownership and control of resources in the hall. For example, in late 1934 and early 1935 the Socialist League wanted to

¹⁴⁰ *New Leader*, 9/9/38, p2

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*,

The ILP were of course guilty of doing this too. Len Edmondson recalled, at a popular front meeting, Steve Wilson of Gateshead ILP asking if Churchill and Lloyd George would get into a popular front cabinet.

Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98

¹⁴² N. Todd, *op cit.*, *passim*

¹⁴³ *New Leader*, 14/2/37, p6

January 1937 saw a joint meeting at Westfield Hall that showed the 'magnificent' film 'In the Land of the Soviets'.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 1/37, p3

¹⁴⁴ The same was true of Shildon, where the ILP co-operated with the Socialist League against the Labour Party in the early stages of the Unity Campaign. It supported the two local Socialist League members expelled from the Labour Party over their support of the Unity Campaign. (Around the same time, Shildon ILP attacked the Labour controlled council for its lavish spending on the coronation celebrations). Again, the Unity Campaign had not initiated this co-operation as there was co-operation over Spain in late 1936. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of the development of relations between the left parties in Shildon after this date.

New Leader, 11/12/36, p6; 5/3/37, p6 and 19/3/37, p6

¹⁴⁵ Maureen Callcott revealed her sympathies with Ruth Dodds' view, calling the ILP disaffiliation 'disastrous' in Gateshead as the ILP 'rump' retained the 'splendid premises' of Westfield Hall which it 'then totally neglected'. The footnote to this is not particularly useful as it reads merely 'op cit., p12'

M. Callcott, 'The Making of a Labour Stronghold: Electoral Politics in County Durham Between the Two World Wars', in M. Callcott & R. Challinor, *Working Class Politics in North East England* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne Polytechnic, Newcastle, 1983) p74

sell the billiard table to pay for repairs, but the ILP objected.¹⁴⁶ The dissolution of the Socialist League further complicated the situation. In July 1937, James Watson (secretary of Gateshead ILP) expressed concern at the operating of a 'nameless' group which had recently 'shown more activity in the hall than our members like'.¹⁴⁷ Watson hoped that 'this spirit of mistrust will not continue and we will get away from squabbling about bricks and mortar and get on with the more important work'.¹⁴⁸ This did not happen as the suspicion of summer 1937 came to full fruition. By December 1938 the nameless group, though now calling itself Gateshead Socialist Society, had left Westfield Hall to the ILP. Ruth Dodds saw the end of her group's connection with the hall as the 'end of an epoch' and was angered by the 'unfriendly attitude of the ILP'.¹⁴⁹ Len Edmondson claimed that GSS dwindled until it became very small, with the financial burden of maintaining the hall and paying the mortgage falling increasingly on the ILP. Given that the ILP was raising practically all the funds, they informed GSS that they had no right to ownership of the hall. Len thought that GSS was relieved when this occurred as its members were worried that they might be called upon personally to finance the hall. They were, in fact, glad to leave it to the ILP.¹⁵⁰ Wherever the blame lay, this split had been developing throughout the thirties. Yet it was in 1938, when the call for unity might have been expected to have stimulated even greater efforts to make it a political reality on the ground, that the decisive breach between the ILP and Labour left in Gateshead occurred.

The Deterioration in the International Situation, 1938

Despite the negative experiences at the municipal polls and the very limited nature of united front activity over the Spanish civil war, the governmental crisis in spring 1938 (culminating in the resignation of Anthony Eden), gave north east Communists renewed hope for the united front. A leading Communist was certainly optimistic about the prospects of the united front. In early March 1938 William Allan, north east district delegate to the CP Central Committee, reported on a Labour conference on the international situation in Newcastle. Allan claimed that there was a general desire to get the 'machinery working now, but also a considerable clear feeling of it is time for everybody to get together'.¹⁵¹ Allan, one of five Communists at the conference, thought it 'remarkable how friendly is the feeling towards

¹⁴⁶ Gateshead Socialist League EC Minutes, 6/12/34 and 20/2/35 (TWAS, PO/SLI/1)

¹⁴⁷ James Watson letter to Francis Johnson, 5/7/37, Francis Johnson Correspondence, 1929-39, Reel 20, 37/2, (MLHA)

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.,

¹⁴⁹ M. Callcott (ed.), *A Pilgrimage of Grace. The Diaries of Ruth Dodds, 1905-1974* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) p161

¹⁵⁰ Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98

¹⁵¹ CP Central Committee Minutes, 5/3/38, Reel No.7 (MLHA)

us'.¹⁵² The Communist group helped to reshape the resolutions and also secured the addition of an emergency resolution which became the main resolution.

In addition to this conference, there was evidence of united front activity around the international situation (apart from that linked with the 'Aid Spain' campaigns) in two north east localities. A CP report mentioned that, during the crisis, Communists held nightly meetings in Newcastle that culminated in a rally which included a Labour councillor speaker. The CP secured some success in its attempts to organise a joint campaign with Labour in Newcastle as a deputation of Labour Party members was organised to meet the local Labour leadership to discuss the proposals.¹⁵³ In Blaydon, there was a united front demonstration jointly organised by the Labour Party and CP in April 1938. The meeting was a 'result of recent feeling that a "United Front" was needed to oppose the policy of the Government'.¹⁵⁴ This certainly seemed more promising than what occurred at Leeds, for example. In March 1938 Leeds CP attempted to merge a meeting with the Labour Party but the proposal was rejected.¹⁵⁵

Elsewhere in the north east, the CP failed in its endeavours to use the deteriorating international situation to promote the united front. South Shields CP produced a leaflet entitled 'Defend Austrian Independence' which listed a Labour 'Peace and Security' meeting. Albert Gompertz (secretary of South Shields LP&TC), emphasising that the meeting was organised under Labour auspices, denounced Communist 'impertinence', 'emphatically' repudiated any links with Communists and pointed out that CP attempts to affiliate to Labour had been 'repeatedly rebuffed'.¹⁵⁶ This was consistent with events a few weeks before. Two NUWM officials had been nominated delegates to South Shields LP&TC. Both were rejected due to their membership of a proscribed organisation.¹⁵⁷ However, only two months after his attack on the CP, Gompertz, speaking at a Labour meeting demanding the ending of non-intervention in Spain, 'vigorously attacked the policy of the National Government and called for a united

¹⁵² Ibid.,

¹⁵³ The Labour councillors were not named in the report.

'The Party and the Crisis', 2-3/38, CP Central Committee Minutes, Reel No.7 (MLHA)

¹⁵⁴ Steve Lawther actually endorsed the United Peace alliance, but the meeting still called itself a united front one. It is included in this united front chapter as the meeting only had Communists and Labour representatives on the platform.

Blaydon Courier, 15/4/38, p8

¹⁵⁵ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p401

¹⁵⁶ *North Mail*, 18/3/38, p9 and *Shields Gazette*, 18/3/38, p7

¹⁵⁷ *Shields Gazette*, 1/3/38, p4

Curiously, South Shields LP&TC was faced with the same problem the following year as a trade union elected two well-known Communists as delegates to the TC. Gompertz asked the TUC for advice.

Gompertz letter to Harries, 5/1/39 (WMRC, 292/79S/37)

effort to sweep it from power before Britain and France were submerged'.¹⁵⁸ This could have indicated a change of heart by Gompertz. Alternatively, it may have been mere meaningless rhetoric. A third alternative is that Gompertz could have been referring to a 'united effort' with Liberals as opposed to Communists (see chapter five). Unfortunately there is insufficient evidence to decide firmly. If he was now more favourable to co-operation with Communists, the change had occurred very rapidly. Yet, regardless of Gompertz's attitude, there is no evidence in its minutes and other sources that the deteriorating international situation from spring 1938 made South Shields LP&TC as a whole more favourable towards a united front with Communists.

As with Aitken's assessment of the situation in autumn 1936, Allan's optimism in March 1938 proved equally unjustified. There appears to have been no united front activity on the international situation between the CP and Labour in spring 1938 apart from that in Blaydon and Newcastle. In Blaydon, the same people organised united front meetings around the worsening international situation as had organised meetings on Spain and Blaydon SMAC. Moreover, united front activity in Newcastle was insubstantial. There is no indication that the Communist-proposed joint campaign with Labour ever came to anything. It is not clear whether the five Communists present at the official conference were invited as Communists or were representatives of trade unions (Allan himself could have represented Cambois miners' lodge, for example). The conference would have taken on more significance for the united front if the Communists had been invited *as Communists*. Regardless of this, however, the conference seems to have been an isolated phenomenon and did not mark the beginning of increased united front activity throughout the north east. United front activity in Newcastle in spring 1938 amounted to one Communist organised meeting with one Labour speaker. This meeting and the experiences of one Communist at one Labour-organised conference do not significantly modify the general picture of the official north east labour movement eschewing united front activity with the CP.

There were, admittedly, indications of support for left unity in other sections of the official north east labour movement in spring 1938, manifest in criticisms of the Black Circular. In April 1938 Jarrow LP&TC passed a resolution requesting that the Black Circular be rescinded.¹⁵⁹ Later in the year Wallsend TC argued that, in view of the national and international crises, the Black Circular should be abolished.¹⁶⁰ Yet, again, the organisations involved were not recent or unexpected recruits to the united front. Wallsend TC's position

¹⁵⁸ *Shields Gazette*, 16/5/38, p9

¹⁵⁹ G. Brown letter to Citrine, 5/4/38 (WMRC, 292/777/2)

had not changed since it had provided the strongest opposition in the north east to the Black Circular in 1935 (see chapter one). Jarrow LP&TC supported the popular front in 1938, and thus abolition of the rules excluding Communists from trades councils was a logical stance to take (see chapter five).

But there remained barriers to the united front from more unexpected quarters. Allan openly acknowledged that some of his Communist colleagues were still not completely free of sectarianism themselves. In his report of early March 1938, Allan described an incident at the official labour movement conference which indicated this. A Labour PPC speaker quoted from three newspapers. He named the first two papers but did not name the *Daily Worker*, which the Communists present knew was the source of the third quote. One of the Communists then asked what the third paper quoted was, forcing the speaker to name the *Daily Worker*. Allan commented: 'And the comrade thinks he has done a good thing. [...] it is a good thing for someone to be expressing an opinion from the DW [sic.], why should it be necessary if someone is quoting, that they should put the name of the paper'.¹⁶¹ Allan used this incident to illustrate the observation that there was remained a great deal of sectarianism in the north east CP which had existed for many years.¹⁶² Thus, even within the party that was the most favourably disposed towards the united front in the north east, there were those who retained the sectarian attitudes of an earlier era. The north east CP implicitly recognised this at its district congress in August 1938 with a statement that 'much more should have been done to develop joint activity of all kinds' with Labour, the unions and 'democratic forces'.¹⁶³ The way to do this, it was argued, was through mobilising for Labour candidates at elections. Yet, as noted above, the CP attempted to do this in many localities and it yielded nothing in terms of improved relations with Labour. A year later Hymie Lee, the now north east delegate, was still complaining to the CP Central Committee that there was a 'great deal' of sectarianism in the party.¹⁶⁴ Murphy highlighted residual sectarianism towards Labour in the West Yorkshire CP and an 'inward looking mentality'.¹⁶⁵ This insular mentality was typical of a small political

¹⁶⁰ W.H. Smith letter to Citrine, 7/12/38 (WMRC, 292/777/2)

¹⁶¹ CP Central Committee Minutes, 5/3/38, Reel No.7 (MLHA)

¹⁶² This had been recognised the previous year, too. A report to the fourteenth CP Congress in May 1937 noted that the 'north east district has been in a sectarian rut for years'.

K. Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism* (Allen Lane, 1969) p36

¹⁶³ The conference also affirmed its readiness to accept the Labour Party constitution. The one positive aspect regarding the united front at the conference was that it was addressed by the Labour mayor, Pickering (see above).

North Mail, 29/8/38, p5 and *Daily Worker* (final edition), 29/8/38, p5

¹⁶⁴ CP Central Committee Minutes, 19/3/39, Reel No.10 (MLHA)

Sectarianism was also noted as a feature of the far larger and more influential Scottish CP in February 1939.

R. Eatwell, op cit., p361

¹⁶⁵ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p319

group in a precarious position which lacked significant influence in the West Yorkshire labour movement. The north east CP was perhaps an even more isolated and less influential force than its West Yorkshire counterpart, so this sectarianism can be explained in the same way.

There was even less evidence of overt support for the united front at the time of the Munich crisis in autumn 1938. At a meeting of South Shields NUGMW joint branch council, J.N. Lisle made an urgent appeal to all workers to unite against fascism and urged the working class to demonstrate their will before it was too late.¹⁶⁶ The following month, Spen lodge passed a unanimous resolution requesting an 'all in' conference immediately to unite 'working class' forces in preparation for the general election.¹⁶⁷ Yet, like Communist attempts in spring 1938 to promote unity, Lisle's call had no obvious impact on relations between the Labour Party and CP in South Shields. Andy Lawther was influential in Spen lodge, so its support for the united front was not particularly remarkable. Moreover, these calls seem to have been isolated phenomena and do not provide sufficient grounds for suggesting that the united front policy was ever particularly well supported within the ranks of the official north east labour movement either before, during or after the Unity Campaign. This can be partly explained by the fact that, following the unspectacular Unity Campaign, united front supporters (with, of course, the exception of the ILP), began to agitate for a popular front. The campaign for a United Peace Alliance, which began in spring 1938, is discussed in the following chapter.

Very few historians have claimed any successes for the Unity Campaign: many who might have been expected to view the campaign in a more positive light than Pimlott had very little to say about it.¹⁶⁸ The campaign in the north east certainly appears to have had very few successes.¹⁶⁹ Andrew Thorpe's claim that the Unity Campaign resulted 'in some inter-party co-operation at rank-and-file level' was applicable to the region, although this co-operation was

¹⁶⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 23/9/38 p4

¹⁶⁷ Robert Ebdon letter to TUC, 18/10/38 (WMRC, 292/743.11/5)

¹⁶⁸ This was true of G.D.H. Cole (who was on the Labour left at the time) and Michael Foot (who supported Unity at the time). It was equally true of Foot's biographer, as well as Noreen Branson, Willie Thompson, Ralph Miliband and Kevin Morgan.

G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party From 1914* (Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1969, first published 1949) pp347-50; M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, 1897-1945, Vol.1* (Granada, 1982, first published, 1962) pp264-266; M. Jones, *Michael Foot* (Gollancz, 1995) p66; N. Branson, op cit.,; R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (Merlin Press, second edition reprint 1987, second edition 1972, first edition 1961) pp250-2; W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism, 1920-1991* (Pluto, 1992) pp56-7 and K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989) p35

¹⁶⁹ All the north east district CP could say about Unity agitation with the ILP after the event was that it was 'successful'.

The North East Marches On (CP North East District Committee, n.d., probably 1938 or 1939) (NPL, L329.4) p14

very limited in scale.¹⁷⁰ However, the Unity Campaign did not initiate this co-operation, which had been occurring in a limited way in late 1936. Nor did the campaign appreciably increase this activity in terms of numbers. In fact, it failed to mobilise the numbers of organisations that TJPC meetings on the International Peace Congress and Spanish civil war did in autumn 1936. Instead, it merely provided those already engaged in united front work with a convenient banner under which to organise. There is also no evidence that the campaign stimulated a labour movement-wide 'debate on left ideas and activities' in the north east, as claimed nationally by James Jupp.¹⁷¹ The overall impression is that moderates within the north east labour movement let the left get on with it and, for the most part, either tolerated or ignored them. When moderates like Yarwood did pronounce, it was merely to condemn Communism, hardly what could be described as 'debate'. Not only did the Unity Campaign fail to mobilise significant support at its meetings, it had no positive palpable effects on wider united front activity in the region. The question of why the Unity Campaign failed so dismally can now be addressed.

Why did the Unity Campaign Fail?

Some of the reasons for the national failure of the Unity Campaign are applicable when explaining its regional failure. One important reason, commented on by several historians, was, in Ben Pimlott's words, the fact that all three parties 'had special reasons for wishing to participate. These did not coincide [...]'.¹⁷² This was also highlighted by Brockway in 1938. There were differences between the three parties on the conditions of affiliation to Labour: the CP was, according to Brockway, prepared to enter unconditionally while the ILP had conditions. There were also divisions on the programme of immediate action to be urged on the Labour Party which revolved largely around attitudes to Russia and foreign policy in general.¹⁷³

However, not every argument for the national failure applied to the north east. Murphy's explanation attached importance to the fact that the CP defended the Moscow Show Trials and attacked 'Trotskyists' before supporting 'unity' and that this occurred as much at

¹⁷⁰ Thorpe himself did not attempt to quantify this activity.

A. Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (Macmillan, 1997) p93

¹⁷¹ J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982) p123

¹⁷² B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, p78

Several other historians made similar points.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp261-311; R.E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre. The Independent Labour Party, 1893-1940* (Longmans, 1966) p197; J. Campbell, op cit., pp73-4; T. Burridge, *Clement Attlee* (Jonathon Cape, 1985) p124; S. Burgess, *Stafford Cripps. A Political Life* (Gollancz, 1999) p108; H. Dewar, *Communist Politics in Britain. The CPGB From its Origins to the Second World War* (Pluto, 1976) pp110-112 and J. Swift, op cit., p272

¹⁷³ F. Brockway, op cit., pp220-3

local level as national.¹⁷⁴ Leeds CP, for example, campaigned against ‘Trotskyists’ with zeal and held meetings defending the Show Trials.¹⁷⁵ In the north east, antagonism between alleged Trotskyists and Communists emerged into the public domain in South Shields. In mid-April 1938, Anthony Lowther, a prominent Communist, wrote a bitter attack on local Trotskyists who, he claimed, were ‘preventing the establishment of unity against fascism’ and warning people to ‘be on their guard against this treacherous group [...]’.¹⁷⁶ Lowther identified several correspondents in the *Shields Gazette* as belonging to the group. In the ensuing days, three individuals (or possibly the same individual using several *nom de plumes*) responded, criticising CP support for the popular front and its attitude to religion. Lowther and another Communist responded accordingly.¹⁷⁷ This was the only obvious controversy between putative Trotskyists and Communists in the north east and it only lasted for three weeks before the editor closed correspondence on the issue. This debate came eighteen months after the Unity Campaign began, so could have had no effect in alienating potential support for it in the north east.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, the Show Trials were not mentioned at all by the Communists’ critics. When Yarwood, for example, attacked the CP in July 1937 he made no mention in his long tirade of the Show Trials.¹⁷⁹ In fact, the Show Trials do not seem to have figured prominently in the debates about Communism in the north east at all. (As noted above, very few openly attacked the CP in the north east anyway, so debates were few). Judging from the letters pages of regional newspapers, the Show Trials and the debate surrounding Trotsky’s critique of Stalin’s regime seem to have had no discernible impact on public opinion in the north east.

Was the north east CP less committed to defending Stalin’s regime than its counterpart in West Yorkshire? The example of South Shields reveals that, where Stalin’s policies were criticised openly, Communists immediately mounted a robust defence. If the attitude of South Shields CP was representative of the north east as a whole, then the CP would have behaved

¹⁷⁴ Brockway’s second reason for the failure of the campaign was the effect of the Show Trials on the British working class.

Ibid., p224

¹⁷⁵ D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp280, 302, 330 and 333

¹⁷⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 16/4/38, p4

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 19/4/38, p4; 20/4/38, p4; 22/4/38, p6; 26/4/38, p4; 30/4/38, p4; 2/5/38, p4 and 6/5/38, p5

¹⁷⁸ The accepted date for the arrival of Trotskyism on Tyneside was 1939. This was drawn from an internal ILP report on the activities of Trotskyists within the party during the Second world war. If the South Shields correspondents were Trotskyists, then this date needs to be revised. Perhaps 1939 was the date that Trotskyism arrived in the north east ILP. If this was the case, then it provides an explanation of why there was so little debate over the merits of Trotskyism on the left before 1939.

Report on the Enquiry into Newcastle ILP, 22 & 23/5/43 (in possession of Dr Raymond Challinor) p5 and R. Challinor, ‘T. Dan Smith: the Youthful Revolutionary’, *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.28 (1994) p17

¹⁷⁹ Or if he did, it was not reported. As he was quoted extensively in this report, it is unlikely that mention of the Show Trials would have been edited out.

similarly to that in West Yorkshire had it had to deal with criticism of the Soviet Union. In practice, it did not need to defend the Soviet Union as it was rarely attacked and the scarcity of obvious Trotskyists meant that there was hardly anyone to condemn on the left. In fact, the north east provided the most pro-Soviet Union high profile figure in the Labour Party in the form of C.P. Trevelyan. In Bradford, some leading official labour movement figures campaigned in defence of Trotsky. Though previously pro-united front, they came to vigorously oppose it and the CP. The Leeds Labour Party mounted a vigorous and sustained attack through the pages of a local newspaper on the popular front and the Communist Party, much of which was orchestrated by Trotskyists within the Labour Party.¹⁸⁰ There seems to have been no parallel cases in the north east: the whole region was strangely isolated from and oblivious to these controversies. This reinforces the picture of a relatively introverted, parochial labour movement discussed in chapter two.

The attitude of Labour opponents of Unity was also largely different in the north east when compared to West Yorkshire. Murphy claimed that an important reason for the failure of the Unity Campaign was the mounting of counter-offensives by the Labour Party which disciplined its members who were involved in the campaign. This occurred in Leeds Labour Party and its members (not all of whom were Trotskyists) ensured that much anti-popular front material was published in the local press. As a result, the Unity Campaign in Leeds received little labour movement support.¹⁸¹ As discussed above, only a few important north east Labour leaders pronounced publicly against Communism and the Unity Campaign and only one DLP, Bishop Auckland, disciplined members involved in it. Prominent Labour figures, like those involved in united front organisations such as Blaydon SMAC, were also left alone. In the north east, general Labour opposition to the campaign was manifest simply in the poor support the campaign received. The Labour leadership in the region was either more tolerant of dissent than the national one or was less paranoid about the threat of Communism. Of course, it is easier to be tolerant of a potential threat if you do not regard it as such, or are not even aware of its existence.

Loyalty to the Labour Party and the decisions of the national conference must have played a large part in the failure of the Unity Campaign in the north east. In his attack on the united front and the CP, Yarwood said that even the CP admitted that 'thanks to [...] loyal membership, they are making little or no progress in our union' [the NUGMW].¹⁸² In West

Newcastle Journal, 5/7/37, p9

¹⁸⁰ D.L. Murphy, pp322 and 327

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp319, 327 and 329

¹⁸² *Newcastle Journal*, 5/7/37, p9

Yorkshire, loyalty informed the decision of the relatively left wing Bradford TC which, by a large majority, refused to participate in the Unity Campaign. This was despite the fact that it remained tolerant of Communists in defiance of Transport House. Thus, as with the north east, tolerance and respect of Communists as trade unionists (as revealed by the North Shields trawlermen's strike of January 1937) or left wing activists did not translate into positive support for their policies and a desire for a formal union with them. Murphy further claimed that Labour loyalty in Bradford was increased due to a split in Bradford Labour Party which reached its nadir when three wards of the party seceded and stood candidates against Labour in the 1937 municipal elections.¹⁸³ As discussed in chapter two, similar splits occurred in many parts of the north east Labour Party and thus here, too, loyalty to the national organisation could have been enhanced in those remaining true to their local Labour Party.¹⁸⁴

Many of the reasons for the failure of the Unity Campaign are those that explain the lack of united front activity in the region in 1936 and the problems both united and popular front advocates faced when dealing with the north east labour movement: the lack of influence of the Labour left in the region and the small and un-influential north east CP and ILP. Birmingham was a more extreme example of this. Peter Drake wrote that there was no Unity Campaign in Birmingham as the ILP and Socialist League 'scarcely existed'.¹⁸⁵ In addition, the moderate-dominated official labour movement in the north east was too divided within itself and embroiled in its own internal controversies to be receptive to the idea of unity with external political parties; especially ones which had practically nothing to offer in terms of votes and with whom association was thought likely to detract from potential Labour support.

In addition, opposition to involvement in the campaign from sections of the participating parties, and particularly the Socialist League, was another of the reasons given by many historians for the national failure of the campaign.¹⁸⁶ This opposition, which contrasted with the picture of united front activity in late 1936, was evident in the north east. Ellen Wilkinson was not a strong advocate of the Unity Campaign and Ruth Dodds opposed it. The ILP, though involved, became sectarian in activities outside of the Unity Campaign. Even the CP, the strongest supporter of the united front in the region, revealed some sectarianism and, by spring 1939, it seemed to have forgotten about maintaining the united front at the polls in

¹⁸³ D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, p322

¹⁸⁴ As mentioned above, it was only in Shildon that this conflict was directly linked with the Unity Campaign. Unfortunately, Murphy did not reveal what caused the split in Bradford Labour Party.

¹⁸⁵ P.D. Drake, *op cit.*, p268

¹⁸⁶ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, p97; J. Swift, *op cit.*, p272 and G.D.H. Cole, *op cit.*, p347-50 Dewar claimed this opposition was based on 'revolutionary grounds'. Burridge, curiously, thought that the Socialist League was more enthusiastic than the other two parties.

the face of the Moderate threat at Morpeth. That the Unity Campaign failed to overcome this opposition and residual sectarianism was one of the reasons for the campaign's failure.

One notable comparison suggesting the relative failure of the Unity Campaign even within the moderate north east was the fact that it could not muster anywhere near the same kind of support that 'Aid Spain' united front activities had in autumn 1936. 'Aid Spain' activities were generally well supported in the north east, 1936-1939 (see chapter eight). It is quite likely that many potential Unity Campaign supporters instead devoted their energies to these campaigns, for which there were outlets in the official movement, especially after the ending of the national leadership's equivocation in the early months of the conflict. Of course, activists could, and sometimes did, do both, but the sheer amount of time and energy required would certainly have limited this number considerably.¹⁸⁷ It was recognised in the CP Central Committee that half of CP branches had failed to attempt to get local labour movement bodies to approach the Labour Party about allowing CP affiliation to it in 1937. Local CP branches were more involved in 'Aid Spain' campaigns and the LBC.¹⁸⁸

The main reason for the failure of the Unity Campaign in the north east was the lack of trade union support it received, which, along with the hostility of the Labour leadership, was also the main reason it failed nationally.¹⁸⁹ This was perhaps surprising given that the largest and most politically influential union in the region, the DMA, officially supported the united front from 1936 to mid-1937 when the policy was defeated at MFGB conference.¹⁹⁰ The DMA elected Cripps to address its annual gala in February 1937 and pushed for the united front within the MFGB in the summer. Yet it did not lend any official support to the Unity Campaign in the first half of 1937. The only DMA official involved was Sam Watson who was a new edition to the union's full time staff. Even Will Lawther, Watson's left wing comrade on the DMA executive, was not prominently involved. This was surprising given his strong advocacy of co-operation with Communists in 1936 and before. It is unlikely that union business kept him too busy to become involved as Watson found time to support the campaign.

H. Dewar, op cit., pp110-112 and T. BurrIDGE, op cit., p124

¹⁸⁷ Buchanan remarked on the 'exhausting amount of practical work required' in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns. T. Buchanan, 'Britain's Popular Front?: Aid Spain and the British Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.31 (1991) p71

¹⁸⁸ CP Central Committee Minutes, 30/10/37, Reel No.4 (MLHA)

¹⁸⁹ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, p96; R.E. Dowse, op cit., p197; J. Campbell, op cit., pp73-4 and J. Swift, op cit., p273

¹⁹⁰ Brockway claimed that the MFGB stopped supporting unity with the CP due to its support for the second Moscow Show Trial in January 1937.

F. Brockway, op cit., p224

A more likely scenario is that this was an example of Lawther's slow rightward drift.¹⁹¹ Given his election as a gala speaker, Cripps' leading role in the Unity Campaign had certainly not alienated the Durham miners. Yet, as with Communist trade union activists, respect for an individual and their achievements in one area did not lead to support for their political projects. As the *Sunday Sun* remarked, the choice of Cripps was due to his conduct of the Gresford disaster inquiry on behalf of the MFGB.¹⁹² The DMA's general attitude is explicable if its behaviour in 1936 is recalled. Then, although committed theoretically to the united front, the DMA consistently refused to support practical united front efforts such as the Hunger March. The furthest it went was inviting Communists to its anti-Means Test march of August 1936. Overall, the evidence suggests that the DMA was not truly committed to the united front: it was certainly not committed enough to support any practical efforts at its realisation on the ground after summer 1936. The united front was easy enough to support until it was time to actually do something practical.

Brockway's third reason for the failure of the Unity Campaign, and the one he attached most importance to, was the behaviour of the national Unity Campaign committee itself. It 'was responsible for the most direct cause of the collapse of the Campaign. The Committee crumpled up in the face of the opposition of the Labour Party Executive, and instinctively the working class felt that conviction and fight had gone out of the Campaign'.¹⁹³

The voluntary liquidation of the Socialist League was the prime example of this 'crumpling'. In a similar vein, Bryant argued that, although the Unity Campaign was regarded as linked to Russia, which made its task difficult,

¹⁹¹ As discussed in chapter six, both Lawther and Watson supported Cripps' popular front campaign in 1939, but, though Cripps received support from the left and was on the left himself, his actual policy was not a left wing one. His programme was a watered-down version of the Labour Party one. Thus, Lawther's move to the right could have been compatible with support for a popular front, class collaborationist policy. On saying that, the 1937 Unity manifesto was hardly a revolutionary document.

See L.H. Mates, 'From Revolutionary to Reactionary: The Life of Will Lawther', M.A. Thesis, Newcastle University (1996) *passim*

Lawther was a strong advocate of rearmament at the 1937 TUC conference, which placed him on the right. He argued against Arthur Horner and Nye Bevan, who held a left wing position of opposition to rearmament: that the government had shown that it was more likely to use arms to support rather than oppose fascism. However, Lawther did support international unity with Russian unions. He spoke for the miners in an attempt at the 1938 TUC Annual Conference to refer back a report recommending that Russian unions be denied the right to join the International Federation of Trade Unions. Lawther refused to withdraw the reference back unless the General Council agreed to further negotiations with the IFTU. This was refused and the reference back was defeated 2.619m to 1.493m votes.

TUC ARs, 1937, pp412-418 and 1938, p408

¹⁹² *Sunday Sun*, 14/2/37, p1

¹⁹³ F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p224

The other two reasons, as mentioned above, were the repercussions of the POUM controversy in Spain and the Moscow Show Trials.

‘the real problem lay in the fact that at no stage did any of the United Front proponents take the issues of pulling the Labour Party with them seriously enough. The only tactic was to assert what was seen as the urgent truth, and such impatience meant the project was bound to be a failure’.¹⁹⁴

This suggests that, with better tactics, united front proponents could have secured Labour Party support and achieved their objects. The case of the north east reveals that whatever Labour supporters of the united front did, they would not have been able to achieve much more than the little they actually did. Their task, for the reasons discussed here, was simply too great.

The Overall Effect of the Unity Campaign in the North East

Many have claimed that not only did the Unity Campaign not achieve anything positive, it actually had very damaging consequences for those involved. For example, Brockway later asserted that the campaign only had negative effects: ‘[...] the destruction of the Socialist League, the loss of influence of Cripps, Bevan, Strauss and other “Lefts”, the strengthening of the reactionary leaders, and the disillusionment of the rank-and-file’.¹⁹⁵ Pimlott endorsed this assessment and went even further by claiming that the campaign also had negative ramifications for the popular front as it ‘went far to discredit all alliances’.¹⁹⁶ Pointing out that after the Unity Campaign, the united front received far less support in labour movement conferences than it had only the previous year, Murphy also endorsed Brockway’s assessment and deplored the loss of the Socialist League, as did Foot.¹⁹⁷ For the first time in its history, the Labour Party had no organised left opposition to the leadership. Murphy also noted that for the CP, involvement in the Unity Campaign had not been a disaster. It had managed to silence left criticism of the Show Trials for six months and emerged from the campaign in a position of intellectual dominance over the rest of the left.¹⁹⁸ Dewar noted that another result of the Unity Campaign was a further weakening of the ‘moribund’ ILP to the benefit of the CP. He, too, perceived the dissolution of the Socialist League as detrimental to the left as it was the only

¹⁹⁴ C. Bryant, op cit., p146

¹⁹⁵ F. Brockway, *Inside the Left. Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament* (George Allen & Unwin, 1942) pp269-270

In 1938 Brockway wrote that the ending of the Socialist League was a greater blow to federal unity in the Labour Party than anything positive the Unity Campaign achieved. He dealt with the decision to dissolve the Socialist League in some detail: certain that the CP was instrumental in the decision being taken, he speculated that the CP may have advocated this course as it saw the Socialist League as a rival.

F. Brockway, *The Workers Front*, pp224-229

¹⁹⁶ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, p106

¹⁹⁷ M. Foot, op cit., pp264-266

¹⁹⁸ D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp312 and 334

body inside the Labour Party that was engaged in socialist propaganda.¹⁹⁹ John Swift thought that the bitter divisions over the campaign probably did Labour more harm than anything else and Bryant, who generally took a relatively benign view of the campaign, concurred.²⁰⁰

However, though the Unity Campaign in the north east failed to have any obvious positive impact, it did not seem to have an especially negative impact either, contrary to these claims. The case of the north east suggests that the dissolution of the Socialist League did not particularly weaken the left within the official movement. Firstly, the demise of the Socialist League did not necessarily signify the end of socialist organisations within the Labour Party. In Gateshead, the Socialist Society (GSS) eventually replaced the Socialist League. The GSS was smaller than its predecessor, but, as argued in chapter one, the large membership Gateshead Socialist League had on paper did not translate into a dynamic and active organisation. It is possible that the ending of a branch of what was a national organisation engendered some disillusion in ex-members and meant that its replacement suffered in terms of size. Thus, an effect of the Unity Campaign could have been that the GSS was rendered too small to be a viable partner in the running of Westfield Hall. However, it is not clear that there was a direct causal relationship between the two events. Had the Socialist League continued, it, too, may have shrunk. If Gateshead Socialist League was as small and moribund in early 1937 as Len Edmondson claimed, then further shrinkage was the most likely scenario.²⁰¹ Certainly, as Pimlott pointed out, the Socialist League nationally was in difficulties when the Unity Campaign started and many members left between January and May 1937.²⁰² Thus, it is possible that had the Socialist League kept going, a similar situation, with it being turned out of Westfield Hall, would have ultimately resulted. There was certainly evidence that relations between the ILP and Gateshead Socialist League in the hall had not been smooth a long time before the situation came to a head in 1938, after its expiration.

Secondly, even if the Gateshead Labour left had not formed GSS, the loss of the relatively inactive Socialist League branch would not have been a major blow for the left in the region. In retrospect, the best outcome for the united front (or at least for the improvement of understanding between Labour and the ILP) in Gateshead would have been the disillusion of the Socialist League *without* the establishment of GSS. Ex-Socialist League members could then have advocated united front co-operation from within the main body of the Labour Party, rather than from an isolated, introverted and un-influential socialist sect, which was embroiled

¹⁹⁹ H. Dewar, *op cit.*, pp110-112

²⁰⁰ J. Swift, *op cit.*, p281 and C. Bryant, *op cit.*, p146-7

²⁰¹ Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98

²⁰² B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s*, p104

in a relatively combative relationship with the ILP due to the practical problems of a shared premises. The Socialist League was an easy organisation to identify and discipline, as the Labour leadership demonstrated in 1937 (and as it had demonstrated regarding the ILP in 1932). Foot's claim that the loss of the Socialist League rendered the left 'without any effective organisation' implied that the Socialist League was effective. It clearly was not. Moreover, his additional argument that Socialist League supporters 'found themselves hopelessly pitted as individuals against the Executive machine' is also misleading.²⁰³ As was revealed by events, the Socialist League itself had been 'hopelessly pitted' against the executive anyway. Yet there was nothing preventing left wingers from combining within the labour movement in a more fluid, flexible and subtle manner. The case of the north east supports Pimlott's argument that 'The influence of those who sought to further their ideas through the Socialist League might have been far greater if they had *worked together in loose associations* as individuals' [my emphasis].²⁰⁴ Left wingers in the main body of the Labour Party, such as those in Blaydon, did a far better job of promoting united front activity than did Socialist League members. This was also, of course, partly because Socialist League leaders in the region, like Dodds, opposed co-operation with Communists anyway, thus, in this sense too, the end of the Socialist League was not a loss for the united front in the north east.

The Socialist League in Shildon collapsed slightly before the organisation dissolved nationally, but there is no reason to believe that those ex-members of the organisation who remained in the Labour Party did not retain their left wing politics. The same was true of all ex-Socialist League members. The loss of their organisation did not necessarily mean that their politics would be altered. Perhaps they were more likely to feel like pariahs in the official movement, but such treatment could, in fact, have strengthened their views and augmented their determination to change an intolerant and undemocratic Labour Party. Finally, the fact that most of the important and influential working class Labour left wingers were not organised in the Socialist League also meant that its loss was not a particular blow for the left within the official north east movement. Reg Groves, a Trotskyist in the Socialist League, was being ridiculously optimistic in claiming that its destruction meant the loss of a body that could

²⁰³ M. Foot, op cit., p265

²⁰⁴ B. Pimlott, 'The Socialist League: Intellectuals and the Labour Left in the 1930s', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.6, No.3 (1971) p38

Thus the chief significance of the Socialist League 'may be that it succeeded in reducing the real influence of the Labour left' (p12).

have become a centre for revolutionary ideas.²⁰⁵ Dominated by middle class intellectuals, the Socialist League would have needed to change so fundamentally for this to have occurred that it would have been unrecognisable.²⁰⁶ When the ILP had begun to adopt a revolutionary perspective in the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash, its membership realised that its place was not in the Labour Party.²⁰⁷ In thrall to the politically naive, arrogant and gaff-prone barrister Stafford Cripps, the loss of the Socialist League did mean, as Brockway stated, a decline in his personal influence. Cripps was no longer free to un-democratically manipulate part of the Labour left in such a flagrant manner (such as involving it in the initial Unity Campaign negotiations without requesting permission from its executive).²⁰⁸ Thus the decline in Cripps' influence was anything but a negative development for the independence and integrity of the Labour left, although most left wingers remained stubbornly loyal to this pernicious loose cannon.²⁰⁹

The north east ILP after 1937 was certainly in serious decline. Assuming that affiliation fees were paid in full in the north east and that the fee per member remained a constant figure from 1934-1939, then membership of division two of the ILP (which included the north east) declined by two thirds in the period, 1934-1939. This was the second largest decline in ILP membership in any of the regions and consequently represented a relative decline within the national party.²¹⁰ It is possible that this decline was instigated or exacerbated by the Unity Campaign and issues around the united front, as Dewar contended for the ILP nationally. Certainly, the national ILP's support of the united front policy was the cause of the

²⁰⁵ This was despite the fact that the *Daily Worker* celebrated the dissolution of the Socialist League as a victory over Trotskyism. As Murphy pointed out, 'Trotskyist' was a label that was applied to anyone of whatever political persuasion on the left who criticised Stalin's regime.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp313-4

²⁰⁶ The Socialist League executive had no trade unionists on it and was dominated instead by people who had attended public school.

B. Pimlott, 'The Socialist League', p23

²⁰⁷ R.E. Dowse, op cit., p203

²⁰⁸ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p291

²⁰⁹ Cripps and John Strachey were recruited to the left from wealthy Conservative backgrounds. The prestige that they brought Labour, enabling the party to pose a realistic parliamentary challenge in some middle class areas, was part of the explanation for their popularity within the party.

See M. Pugh, "'Class Traitors': Conservative Recruits to Labour, 1900-30', *English Historical Review*, Vol.63, No.450 (1998) pp38-64

²¹⁰ In 1934 the north east ILP accounted for 6.1% of total ILP membership and only 5.4% in 1939. The only actual membership figures for the districts were for 1936 and mentioned in chapter one. The north east ILP accounted for 7% of the total membership, which tallies sufficiently with the affiliation fee figures to suggest that they were both near the reality.

NAC financial report (for year ending February 1939) (BLPES, COLLMISC702/12 and ILP7/4/3)

membership decline of 72% between 1934-1939 in Lancashire, where most opposed co-operation with Communists.²¹¹

Explaining the ILP's considerable decline in the north east is complicated because the available evidence suggests several conflicting interpretations. As noted above, the previously anti-united front Simpson headed the Unity Campaign in the north east and Gateshead ILP participated in united front activity in late 1936 and early 1937, which suggests that previous opponents of co-operation with Communists had come round to supporting the idea by late 1936. This implies that it was not opposition to united front activity with Communists which prompted the decline. However, also noted above is the observation that ILP involvement in the Unity Campaign did not translate into united front co-operation in other areas of political activity which suggests that ILP support for the united front was very short-lived in the region and that the Unity Campaign and united front activity over Spain and the Hunger March in late 1936 made no lasting impact on the somewhat sectarian north east ILP. It is conceivable that, in contrast to Simpson's attitude, the Unity Campaign was the last straw for ILP members who did not favour co-operation with Communists and voted with their feet.

An alternative interpretation turns this on its head. Perhaps the united front was popular in the north east ILP rank-and-file but the regional leadership's refusal to engage in united front activity *outside* of the Unity Campaign led to united front supporters leaving the party. Another aspect of this alternative explanation is the argument that the ILP's lack of involvement in campaigns with other organisations and individuals meant that it became particularly isolated from the wider political scene and was thus unable to recruit new members. These two propositions are not mutually exclusive. The north east ILP's certainly lukewarm attitude to the united front may have been too much for those opposed to the policy and too little for those who supported it, thus alienating both groups. However, there are, of course, other hypotheses; perhaps members left in protest at the ILP's anti-popular front policy; alternatively, as the ILP was in national decline, it would be expected to haemorrhage members at a greater rate than the national average in a region in which it was relatively weak anyway.²¹² Any one, or a combination, of these factors could explain the ILP's particular

²¹¹ In June 1933, Lancashire division opposed co-operation with Communists, which, it claimed, was killing the ILP there.

ILP NAC Minutes, 24-25/6/33 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/4)

²¹² Noreen Branson claimed that there was a large scale defection of ILP members to the CP after the 1935 International Communist Congress (which endorsed the popular front).

N. Branson, *op cit.*, p142

This was not the case for Len Edmondson, who chose the ILP over the CP as, due to the CP's support for the popular front, he thought the ILP 'a more revolutionary party'.

Len Edmondson Interview, 4/11/94

problems in the north east. Unfortunately the evidence does not allow us to be categorical. All that can be said with certainty is that there is no overwhelming evidence that suggests a direct link between ILP involvement in the Unity Campaign and its continued decline in 1937 and after.

In May 1937 Cripps was warned that the Unity Campaign had caused a tremendous amount of bad feeling in the Bristol labour movement (his own political base) without much compensating return and that 'the advance section [i.e. the left] had lost its influence and the right wing become more reactionary and influential'.²¹³ This evidence supports Brockway's aforementioned claim. However, the case of the north east tends not to support this. The fact that all the people involved in the Unity Campaign continued in their official posts and continued agitating for left causes after 1937 suggests that the campaign did not weaken the prestige of Labour left leaders in the region. For example, Watson continued as DMA agent and went on to support the popular front in 1939, as did Will Lawther (see chapter six). For the Blaydon Labour left wingers it was business as usual after the end of the Unity Campaign. The left in the north east was not noticeably weakened by expulsions either, as they only occurred in Shildon. Generally, the north east DLPs do not seem to have been sufficiently bothered by the activities of the left to initiate witch hunts in the movement.

If the indefatigable Labour left leaders in the region were not obviously deterred by the failure of the Unity Campaign, it is probable that their Labour left supporters also soldiered on regardless, and thus the failure of the campaign caused little palpable disenchantment in the left rank-and-file. Again, though, this is difficult to gauge and there were some Labour Party-organised meetings in the region in the late thirties that were marred by the lack of attendance. If there was apathy and disillusion in the ranks, this could equally have been caused by anger or disenchantment with the national Labour Party's poor performance than with anything the left did either at regional or national level. Certainly, the large number of calls from the north east labour movement for the NEC to hold a conference on the international situation in 1938 suggest that there was considerable discontent with the national leadership (see chapter five).

Given that the standing of the left leaders in the region was not significantly diminished or improved by the campaign, then those on the right in the north east did not experience a consequent increase in their influence within the movement. Already in the ascendancy in all

²¹³ J. Swift, *op cit.*, p270

It is curious that the campaign was so damaging in Bristol given its lack of support there. A Unity Campaign meeting in Bristol in summer 1937 which aimed to bring together over 1,000 Labour Party supporters of the campaign was only attended by 50 despite extensive advertising of the meeting.

Ibid., pp276-7

areas of the north east except Blaydon, the moderates merely remained where they were. The fact that there was very little witch hunting of left wingers in the north east labour movement also meant that bitterness between the left and right cannot have been greatly augmented by the Unity Campaign (with the exception of Shildon), and thus the movement as a whole was not significantly debilitated by it. Despite poor attendance at some Labour Party meetings in the late thirties, there is little evidence that the north east labour movement was seriously stagnating or in decline. The Labour Party did suffer some minor setbacks at the municipal polls in 1938, but these were not catastrophic and did not significantly threaten Labour's hold over their councils. As discussed in chapter two, internal labour movement divisions that did not have anything obviously to do with the Unity Campaign and co-operation with Communists were far more damaging in the north east. Moreover, the very fact that there were so many internal disputes indicates the vitality of the official movement: at least its members could be bothered to fall out with each other.

The Unity Campaign did not seem to discredit all alliances, as Pimlott claimed, at least for many of the left's leaders in the north east. As noted above, many involved in the Unity Campaign later supported the popular front campaigns of 1938 and 1939. However, it is possible that some of the left rank-and-file in the region were put off. As will be seen, the Unity Campaign meetings, disappointing though they were, seem to have drawn more rank-and-file support than the later popular front campaigns. This could have been because the Unity Campaign discredited all alliances or, alternatively, it might simply be that left wingers in the north east, like the ILP nationally, supported working class unity but not unity with Liberals and other capitalists. Unfortunately, again, this must remain a matter for speculation. Equally, those on the right who had spoken out against the Unity Campaign, such as Yarwood, were as likely to have been anti-Communist before 1937. Therefore the campaign had merely not convinced them of the utility of a Communist alliance, rather than putting them off the idea of all alliances.

In conclusion, the Unity Campaign appears to have had hardly any impact, either negative or positive, on left politics, the wider labour movement or politics in general in the north east.²¹⁴ Whilst it failed to make a positive impact in the region, it was not as damaging as some contemporaries and historians have claimed. Moreover, study of wider united front activity in the north east reveals that, contrary to the claims of historians such as Noreen

²¹⁴ One positive effect that the Unity campaign may have had in the region was that it 'stirred up radical anti-fascist consciousness among many', though this is difficult to quantify. N. Redfern, 'The British Communist Party, Imperialism and War, 1935-45', Ph.D. Thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University (1997) p36

Branson, the 'rock-like resistance' of the Labour leadership to united action with Communists was hardly undermined at all in the north east, 1936-1939.²¹⁵ In fact, resistance to co-operation with Communists was reflected in most of the labour movement in the region. There were only a few exceptions to this, with many of these coming from the Blaydon area or involving a handful of the same left wing activists within the official movement scattered around the region.²¹⁶ Was the popular front more popular in the north east than the united front? The next chapter discusses the first popular front campaign, that of the United Peace Alliance in 1938.

²¹⁵ N. Branson, *op cit.*, p156

²¹⁶ In West Yorkshire, Huddersfield seems to have been similar to Blaydon as the official labour movement there was to the left of the national movement. Many leading Labour figures there were Marxists. D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, pp326 and 334

CHAPTER FIVE

The United Peace Alliance Campaign and the Munich Crisis, 1938

The United Peace Alliance campaign, which was initiated by *Reynold's News* on 20 March 1938, provided, for the first time, an explicit focus around which all popular front supporters could rally and agitate. Before 1938, the popular front in the north east was manifest only in the composition of its two peace councils, four SMACs and the Left Book Club (LBC).¹ As a British general election drew ever closer, the increasing urgency of the need to remove the National Government from office forced a switch in emphasis in Communist circles (i.e. the CP and Communist influenced Labour left) from the united to the popular front. This urgency was further intensified by the deteriorating international situation in 1938. The United Peace Alliance was a response to the German invasion of Austria on 12 March 1938 and the subsequent pronouncement of an *Anschluss*, with the incorporation of Austria into the German Reich. The situation reached its apogee with Chamberlain's flight to Munich to secure the agreement that gave Nazi Germany a large part of Czechoslovakia on 30 September, 1938. This induced a feeling of powerlessness in the Labour Party and led to increasing calls for a popular front.² Spain also provided a focus for the popular front. A national emergency conference on Spain organised by Labour and Liberal backbenchers in late April 1938 took on the appearance of a popular front as it united Conservatives, Labour, Liberals and Communists on the same platform. This chapter will assess the scale and nature of support for the United Peace Alliance in the north east. It will then examine the new possibilities that the Munich crisis brought for the popular front project and the effects that the political turmoil had in the region.

Support for the United Peace Alliance, January-August 1938

There was only negligible evident support for the United Peace Alliance in the north east trade unions before autumn 1938. This was the case for the DMA. Boldon lodge attempted to raise the issue at DMA council in June 1938. The minutes record merely that the Boldon resolution 'cannot appear' and gave no explanation for this nor of how the resolution was actually worded.³ Presumably the resolution proposed to commit the DMA to support of the United Peace Alliance. This was the first and only time the United Peace Alliance appeared

¹ For discussion of the four SMACs (Durham, Newcastle, Seaham Harbour and Sunderland) see chapter eight.

² R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975) p172

³ DMA Minutes, Circulars etc., 11/6/38 (DMOR)

as an issue in the DMA. Within the DMA executive, Will Pearson supported the popular front in 1938 though his support was not particularly explicit. In a letter to the *Daily Worker*, Pearson stated his agreement with those seeking to unite the democratic forces of this and other countries: 'our clarion call must be "Unity of Action"'.⁴ Yet Pearson's was a lone voice: the United Peace Alliance campaign does not appear to have drawn any vocal support from other DMA executive members, including the left wingers Will Lawther and Sam Watson.

This lack of obvious support for the popular front in the DMA executive was reflected by the lodges. In late March 1938, Ryhope lodge unanimously passed a resolution urging 'all trade unions and labour movements [sic.] [to] take a stand with all progressive movements in an effort to smash the Government's policy, and link up with France, Russia and all other countries which were striving for peace'.⁵ Two months later, Eppleton lodge sent a resolution to Durham DLP asserting that the time had arrived to form a Peace Alliance.⁶ The support for the United Peace Alliance from all three lodges is not particularly surprising since Boldon lodge was present at a Socialist League conference supporting CP affiliation to Labour in 1936 and all three supported the 1936 Hunger March. These appear to have been the only three DMA lodges, out of 175, that expressed some kind of support for the United Peace Alliance. There is not even evidence that other of the DMA's more left wing lodges supported the idea (although of course this could be due to deficiencies in the evidence rather than due to lack of support). Furthermore, there is no evidence of support for the United Peace Alliance in other north east trades unions.

The lack of DMA support for the United Peace Alliance was a disaster for the popular front, as the union was the largest and most influential in the region and had supported the united front. The DMA was representative of the general lack of support the United Peace Alliance secured compared to the Unity Campaign of the previous year. It is conceivable that the DMA was not interested in the United Peace Alliance because, as Pimlott argued, the experience of the Unity Campaign had discredited such alliances.⁷ But, as will be seen, two DMA officials, Lawther and Watson, supported Cripps' popular front campaign in 1939, so this seems unlikely. It did, however, seem to take those on the left inside the DMA (such as Lawther and Watson), longer to alter their position from support of an exclusively working class alliance to one involving Liberals. More importantly, as argued previously, the DMA's theoretical support for the united front did not translate into the field of practical politics,

⁴ *Daily Worker*, 19/5/38, p2

⁵ *North Mail*, 28/3/38, p3 and *Durham Chronicle*, 1/4/38, p7

⁶ *Durham Chronicle*, 13/5/38, p11

⁷ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977) p106

suggesting that support was distinctly lukewarm. Lodges supporting the United Peace Alliance were asking the DMA to endorse an alliance with Liberals against the express wishes of the Labour Party. Given the union's strong loyalty to the national leadership, and the fact that it had firmly allied itself with the Labour Party against the Liberals twenty years previously, its position on the United Peace Alliance is understandable.

Neither was there significantly more support for the United Peace Alliance within the Labour Party. In early May an NEC report on support for the United Peace Alliance noted that Blaydon DLP, Newcastle North DLP and Jarrow LP&TC were among the organisations supporting a conference on the popular front. It was 'probable' that Newcastle East DLP would also support the popular front.⁸ Of course, by openly supporting the popular front, which was in contravention of official Labour policy, these parties opened themselves up to possible expulsion from the Labour Party. It is therefore possible that other north east Labour Parties, or significant numbers of individuals within them, supported the policy but, through fear of the repercussions, did not openly express this support. As Eatwell (who claimed that it was a sense of unity which kept some Labour Party popular front supporters silent) pointed out, it is impossible to gauge the level of this kind of support.⁹ What can be said though is that supporters of the popular front who were too intimidated to openly advocate their position were of very little use to the furtherance of that position. Moreover, the experience of the parties which openly advocated a policy contrary to the national Labour leadership reveals that there was little to fear, despite (or possibly because of) the fact that the NEC had been relatively harsh in its dealings with Unity Campaign supporters.¹⁰ Blaydon Labour Party, for example, openly advocated the united front in 1936-7 and moved on to the popular front with total impunity. As will be seen, leading members of the party went on to support Cripps in 1939 without being disciplined. If the popular front was important to Labour Party members, they should have been prepared to be disciplined in order to advocate it, more so when they saw that their fellow advocates were not harshly dealt with. The same NEC report revealed that the campaign for the United Peace Alliance in the north east was underdeveloped in organisational terms compared to some other parts of Britain. In spring 1938, for example, Oxford DLP established a 'Co-ordinating Committee for Peace and Democracy' which had Labour, Liberal and CP members on it.¹¹ There was no record of any 'Peace Alliance Councils

⁸ NEC Minutes, 5/5/38

⁹ R. Eatwell op cit., pp218-9

¹⁰ Ibid., p220

¹¹ Oxford DLP, like Blaydon, was on the left. It supported the united front in 1933, CP affiliation to Labour in 1936 and the Unity Campaign in 1937. Yet it was forced to withdraw from the 'Co-ordinating Committee'

of Action' (which involved CP, Liberals, LNU, Co-operative Party, peace councils and LBCs), being formed in the region.¹² This, again, reveals the total lack of support.

Furthermore, of the three north east Labour Parties mentioned in the NEC report, only Blaydon seems to have been *actively agitating* on the issue. Speaking at a united front demonstration of Communists and Labour in April 1938, Steve Lawther endorsed the United Peace Alliance.¹³ The Mayday meeting in Blaydon, which appears to have been Labour dominated, still made a call for a 'United People's Front'. Henry Bolton, who had been a delegate to the popular front Spain conference in London in late April, quoted Wilfred Roberts (Liberal MP for Carlisle) who said 'he would work with Conservatives, Liberals, Socialists, Communists or any other ists who wanted to help Spain'.¹⁴ The following month, a Blaydon Labour Party organised 'Solidarity with the people of Spain' demonstration took on the appearance of a popular front as together with the usual miners, trade unionists, Labour people and Co-op members invited, were the CP, Youth Peace Groups, British Legions and 'churches of all denominations'.¹⁵ The fact that only Blaydon provided evidence of Labour popular front *activity* at this time points to a relative indifference on the issue from the other two Labour Parties that supposedly supported the popular front.

There was, however, activity that appeared to be popular front based in at least one other locality. At Blyth there was at least one meeting in spring 1938 that took on the appearance of a popular front, but this did not necessarily indicate official Labour support. A protest against the Nazi invasion of Austria was organised by Blyth CP. After negotiations, the platform was opened to other speakers including the secretary of Blyth TC, a Moderate councillor, a member of Blyth LNU and members of the 'religious movement'. Whilst a cross-section of the Blyth political scene was represented, the meeting was 'conducted on a strict non-party [i.e. non-political] basis'.¹⁶ All of the speakers referred to the need to strengthen the League of Nations and for all to come together to act for peace. The resolution condemned the

when the NEC intervened. Perhaps, had Blaydon DLP organised something similar, it too would have received the attentions of the NEC.

R. Eatwell, op cit., pp251-2

¹² NEC Minutes, 5/5/38;

G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party From 1914* (Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1969, first published 1949) p353 and C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps. The First Modern Chancellor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) p156

¹³ *Blaydon Courier*, 15/4/38, p8

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6/5/38, p8

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10/6/38, p5

It is impossible to say whether Catholics were invited and whether they came: they were not explicitly mentioned in newspaper reports on the meeting. Chapter three argued that labour movement Catholics largely supported the Republic, but it is doubtful whether any Catholic clergy would have shared this perspective.

Blaydon Courier, 17/6/38, p1 and *North Mail*, 13/6/38, p7

¹⁶ *Blyth News*, 21/3/38, p5

invasion of Austria and urged the government 'to use all its influence against fascist aggression and to maintain collective security'.¹⁷ From the newspaper report, there was no call made by any of the speakers for the formation of a popular front either at local or national level. Thus, whilst it would seem that all were united in their criticism of government inactivity, they were not necessarily in favour of replacing that government and, if they were, they were not necessarily in favour of a popular front.

Of the north east Labour MPs, only Ellen Wilkinson was obviously in favour of a popular front in early 1938. Evidence for this was her presence, in April, on the platform at a meeting calling for a Peace Front in Queen's Hall, London. There was a large mixed attendance of Labour, Liberals and Communists.¹⁸ Wilkinson also helped push the popular front within the NEC. In early May 1938, along with Cripps, Laski and Pritt, she submitted a pro-popular front memorandum to the NEC that highlighted the danger in the international situation and argued for the immediate removal of the government. The situation was so serious that to risk losing the next election would jeopardise the possibility of socialism in Britain. Labour was making little progress, it argued, and was unlikely to win without a popular front, which would also mobilise many unattached voters. This would prove to be a challenge that the government could not ignore and was depicted as the one chance for democracy. The memorandum was defeated in the NEC by sixteen votes to four and several members, including Hugh Dalton, wrote up a response.¹⁹ It is not clear if the Wilkinson *et al* memorandum was the one that stimulated discussion and comments from several MPs, including a detailed critique from A. Creech Jones MP, in December 1938. In the archive, only Creech Jones' letter and two sheets noting other MPs' comments exists. Nonetheless, from this letter it can be determined that Wilkinson proposed some kind of 'progressive combination'. Creech Jones' comment that Wilkinson's programme 'sacrifices any economic change towards Socialism, moreover [sic.] to pacify Liberals, and hopes that Communists can convince the public of their disinterested service to the maintenance of democratic rights', indicates what it entailed.²⁰

Yet even Wilkinson's support for the popular front was limited. In a letter to Middleton, secretary of the Labour Party, in late March 1938 she sought to preclude any damage to her reputation within the Labour leadership that might occur because she was billed to appear at an 'All Party Women's Meeting for Peace and Democracy'. Wilkinson explained

¹⁷ Ibid.,

¹⁸ *Tribune*, 14/4/38, p5

¹⁹ NEC Minutes, 5/5/38

²⁰ A. Creech Jones MP letter to Ellen Wilkinson, 14/12/38 (MLHA, CP/IND/DUTT/31/03)

to Middleton that she had been asked to speak at a meeting 'organised by women for women' to protest against fascism in Spain and had agreed to speak on a 'humanitarian basis'.²¹ She subsequently discovered to her 'dismay' that the meeting had been advertised in the *Daily Worker* as a 'political all-party meeting'.²² For this reason, Wilkinson declined to speak. Yet, as noted above, she spoke at a popular front meeting in Queen's Hall, in April. A possible explanation of this apparent inconsistency is that the latter meeting had, for Wilkinson, a 'humanitarian basis'. Obviously, such a term was open to many definitions and would easily allow Wilkinson to choose arbitrarily meetings at which to speak. What is more telling is Wilkinson's desire not to unduly antagonise the Labour leadership. The following year, it would become clear during the Cripps 'Petition campaign' that this desire, and her loyalty to the party, had become stronger.

Another Labour MP, Emmanuel Shinwell (Seaham), had a protean attitude towards the popular front. Before 1938 he seemed to have been a potential United Peace Alliance supporter. As seen in chapter four, Shinwell opposed the Unity Campaign (though he seemed to have briefly supported the united front in late 1936). Despite this, he still appeared quite left wing in mid-1937. At a Seaham DLP conference in August 1937 he criticised the PLP for abstaining on arms estimates instead of voting against them as he had done. This practice began the previous month, as the PLP buckled under trade union pressure. Shinwell also called for the immediate establishment of 'a great peace movement throughout the land, which has for its basis the closest collaboration of League powers and readiness to discuss and settle the economic problems which are the underlying causes of war' which was suggestive of the popular front.²³ The conference passed a resolution approving Shinwell's stand, 'reminding' Labour of the culpability of the government's foreign policy in the present international situation and arguing that 'British arms are not intended to destroy fascism, but will be used solely for the purpose of upholding the interests of British capitalism and Imperialism'.²⁴ Overall, this conference suggests that Shinwell was relatively leftward leaning and may have been sympathetic to the popular front in summer 1937. In fact, a month later he flirted explicitly with the popular front. At Farnworth, Lancashire he said:

'The present moment is not opportune for the development of a popular front in politics, but a crisis may make such a combination necessary. Should our democratic institutions

²¹ Curiously, Wilkinson blamed neither the *Daily Worker* nor the meetings organisers, but rather the 'advertisers of the meeting'.

Ellen Wilkinson letter to Middleton, 26/3/38 (MLHA, SCW/1/29 i and ii)

²² Ibid.,

²³ *Sunday Sun*, 29/8/37, p3; *North Mail*, 30/8/37, p5 and *Durham Chronicle*, 3/9/37, p10

²⁴ Ibid.,

be threatened or an attempt made in the next industrial depression to lower the standard of life of the people it may be necessary to seek the aid of all progressive organisations to protect ourselves'.²⁵

However, when the United Peace Alliance came, Shinwell was unequivocal in his opposition. Speaking for Labour's 'Peace and Security' campaign in March 1938, he said that talk of an alliance with the Liberals only weakened Labour: 'The very fact of associating with another party would prove that we did not believe ourselves to be strong [...] I believe we are strong enough to carry the country if we believe in ourselves'.²⁶ Shinwell thought that only public opinion, not association with 'a few' Liberal MPs, would bring down the government and that the miners would not forget either Lloyd George's or Churchill's past. Labour needed to maintain a 'sturdy independence' and, with the help of public opinion, it would win the next general election.²⁷

Shinwell regularly addressed the popular front during spring 1938 and his message remained fairly constant. However, at a peace meeting in Chester-le-Street in early April 1938, he did sound a little less certain of Labour's electoral potential. Shinwell refuted allegations that Labour did not want a general election and added that if the party could not attain a majority, it would at least force the government to listen. Despite his doubts as to whether Labour would win an election, he remained convinced that there 'was no need for alliances'.²⁸ At the end of the month he attacked labour movement advocates of the popular front as they were doing more to wreck Labour than its opponents: 'they may depend upon it that many of us will decline to associate ourselves with any such movement'.²⁹ He maintained that the government could be turned out of office just as effectively by Labour without alliances and that there was nothing wrong with the party. Some 'striking' Labour by-election victories, revealing that the 'force of public opinion' was behind the party, bolstered Shinwell's view in mid-May.³⁰

In fact, apart from Wilkinson, the only other north east labour movement figure of national standing to support the popular front in early 1938 was C.P. Trevelyan. Henry Bolton said Trevelyan received a 'great reception' for his call for a 'United People's Front nationally

²⁵ *Daily Worker*, 27/9/37, p5

This pro-popular front quote was only evident in the *Daily Worker*, a newspaper that would be expected to quote anyone who supported Communist causes. It has to be assumed that Shinwell did actually say this, and that it was not merely a Communist invention. (Similarly, the *Daily Worker* was the only paper to provide a pro-united front quote from Shinwell in September 1936. See footnote 53, in chapter four).

²⁶ *Durham Chronicle*, 25/3/38, p9

²⁷ *Ibid.*,

²⁸ *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 8/4/38, p6

²⁹ *North Mail*, 20/4/38, p7

and internationally' at the emergency conference on Spain in April 1938.³¹ Trevelyan's was, according to Eatwell, one of the most important speeches of the event.³² In the immediate aftermath of the Spain conference, the Liberal MP Wilfred Roberts wrote twice to Trevelyan asking him to support the Liberal candidate (against the Labour candidate Reg Groves) at the Aylesbury by-election.³³ Unfortunately, there is no copy of Trevelyan's reply (assuming there was one) in the Trevelyan papers.

Another indication of the lack of support for the popular front in the region was the fact that there was only one meeting to rally regional support of the United Peace Alliance in 1938.³⁴ In late May, Gateshead Town Hall was the venue for a United Peace Alliance Conference organised by the 'Peace Alliance Campaign Committee' and addressed by Hamilton Fyfe (a former *Daily Herald* editor). Henry Bolton presided and messages of support were received from Bart Kelly (Labour PPC, Gateshead) Arthur Blenkinsop (Labour PPC, Newcastle East) and Jack Bowman (AEU district secretary) among others.³⁵ It is difficult to identify many of the individuals present or supporting the conference. Presumably the most significant people were mentioned in the press reports and there are few surprises in this list of names. Bolton was, as noted, a prime mover in the TJPC, which could be described as a popular front organisation. The same can be said for those who sent messages of support (which of course was a slightly less controversial act than actually being present at the meeting). Bart Kelly was another controversial figure whose name is not out of place in the context of the popular front. He was a well-known 'fiery propagandist' and the 'stormy petrel' of Stanley UDC.³⁶ Blenkinsop's support was important. In 1937 he had been involved in the Labour Spain Committee (LSC) in the north east (formed after disillusion in the constituencies with the lack of Labour activity on the issue) and was secretary of the area's Constituency Parties Movement and on the provisional committee.³⁷ He became one of Cripp's main north east supporters in 1939 (see chapter six). Yet his political career was in its early stages (he had

³⁰ *Durham Chronicle*, 13/5/38, p9

³¹ *Blaydon Courier*, 6/5/38, p8

³² R. Eatwell, op cit., p227

³³ Wilfred Roberts letters to C.P. Trevelyan, 27/4/38 and 5/5/38 (NRL, CPT153)

³⁴ It is fairly certain that there were no other United Peace Alliance meetings on the issue as none were reported in the regional press (although this does not necessarily mean none occurred) and none were reported in branch minutes. It can be fairly safely assumed that a left wing union branch such as Cambois lodge would have mentioned any other large United Peace Alliance conferences and sent representation had they occurred.

³⁵ *Newcastle Journal*, 30/5/38, p3 and *Blaydon Courier*, 3/6/38, p5

Whilst the *Daily Worker* (27/5/38, p3) advertised the meeting, it did not report after the event.

³⁶ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/36, p1 and Newspaper Cuttings, 1936-45 n.d., n.p.n. (GPL, L908.9)

In 1932, Kelly, who was from a 'political family', argued against operating the Means Test in Lanchester PAC. H. Beynon & T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (Rivers Oram Press, 1994) p346

only become Newcastle East PPC in April 1938) and, at 26, he was very young. He was also middle class (he worked in the clerical staff of a colliery and was an amateur actor in Newcastle People's Theatre) so it was perhaps less surprising that such an individual supported the United Peace Alliance.³⁸ The support of the AEU district secretary, Bowman, was also important, although he remains an obscure figure. He does not seem to have been active on the left before 1938, so perhaps his support for this conference was a coup. However, evidence of his attitudes in 1939 suggests that this support was based on a misunderstanding of what the conference was for (see chapter six).

The *Blaydon Courier* reported that over 300 representatives of Liberal, Labour, Co-operatives and other progressive organisations were present at the conference but, as with the Unity Campaign meetings, there was little detail given of the specific organisations represented.³⁹ The *Daily Worker* revealed that there were delegates from Newcastle DLPs, DMA lodges, Co-op Guilds and the LBC but was no more specific than that.⁴⁰ Other evidence reveals at least two miners lodges, Burradon and Cambois (both of the NMA), were represented with three delegates each.⁴¹ Presumably, too, Ryhope, Eppleton and Boldon lodges (all DMA) and Jarrow LP&TC were represented, given their support for the United Peace Alliance as discussed above (although there is no direct evidence of this). South Shields LP&TC was also represented.⁴²

As with the identifiable individuals, the organisations supporting the conference were much as expected. South Shields LP&TC had recently intimated support for the popular front. When the DCFLP produced an anti-popular front circular in early May (see below), the *Shields Gazette* reported that South Shields LP&TC was not directly affected as it was affiliated to NTFLP which had yet to discuss the issue. Gompertz, secretary of South Shields LP&TC, thought the issue a 'domestic matter' and added; 'the fact that my party sent me to an

³⁷ Blenkinsop letter to Joseph Pole (LSC), 24/7/37 (CCC, LSPC, 1/2/134) and B. Pimlott, op cit., 128-9

³⁸ *North Mail*, 11/4/38, p5

In January 1936 he had written a favourable article on housing in Russia.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 1/36, p1

³⁹ *Blaydon Courier*, 3/6/38, p5

The *Newcastle Journal* (30/5/38, p3) concentrated on Fyfe's speech.

⁴⁰ *Daily Worker*, 27/5/38, p3

⁴¹ Burradon Lodge Minutes, 28/5/38 (TWAS, 1691/1/3) and Cambois Lodge Minutes, 19/5/38 (NR0M, 3793/30)

Brancepeth No.2 Lodge (DMA) received the circular advertising the conference but decided not to be represented.

Brancepeth No.2 Lodge Minutes, 19/5/38 (D/DMA/326/9)

⁴² On receiving a circular from the campaign in May they decided to send three delegates. Four days later, during a debate over the conference an amendment was moved that the party not be represented. This was defeated with only three voting in favour and the delegation went.

South Shields LP&TC Minutes, 20/5/38 and 24/5/38 (SSPL, LPM6)

all party conference in London [on Spain in April] is an indication that they have a broad and open view on the matter'.⁴³ Support, or at least interest, from South Shields LP&TC was significant as the party did not enjoy good relations with Communists (although it was critical of the NEC). However, the case of South Shields LP&TC reveals simply that, despite the fact that the popular front probably necessitated an alliance with Communists, this was insufficient to deter all those who desired an alliance with Liberals. Thus, when Gompertz called for a 'united effort' to sweep the national government from power in mid-May, he was probably thinking of unity with Liberals rather than with Communists.⁴⁴ Delegates from Newcastle DLPs were important, but predictable given the support of a Newcastle PPC (Blenkinsop) and that of Newcastle North and Newcastle East DLPs. The same can be said of support from Jarrow LP&TC (but, significantly, not Jarrow DLP), given Ellen Wilkinson's advocacy of the popular front. Cambois lodge, chaired by Communist William Allan was active in all of these kinds of left initiatives. The presence of Burradon lodge is far more surprising, especially as it was not in the habit of sending delegates to political meetings, no matter how innocuous. The minutes call the event a 'Peace Conference', suggesting that perhaps there was some misunderstanding as to what exactly it was about.⁴⁵ The United Peace Alliance was deliberately named as such in order to not alienate those who associated the popular front with Communists and to attract the majority of the populace who desired peace.⁴⁶ Yet it is, of course, possible that the presence of delegates at the conference indicated support for the popular front.

The attendance figure (of over 300 representatives) requires comment since, if the conference was a public meeting, it compared very unfavourably with, say, the first north east Unity Campaign meeting (with 5,000 present), or even the 4 July Unity Campaign meeting (with 2,000). However, if the conference was not open to the public and only took representatives of political organisations and trade unions, then the figure of 300 is high (the second main Unity meeting in Gateshead had only 65 delegates representing 35 organisations).⁴⁷ From the evidence of lodge minutes it can be determined that these organisations were circularised and invited to attend, but it is unclear if the meeting was also open to the public. Assuming that the conference was not a public meeting, and that South

⁴³ *Shields Gazette*, 4/5/38, p1

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 16/5/38, p9

This, again, is an example of how the united and popular fronts could be confused. Of course, it is possible that Labour in South Shields envisioned a Communist-free popular front.

⁴⁵ It is fairly certain that it was the same event, however, as the date (May 28) and venue (Gateshead) correspond to the United Peace Alliance conference.

⁴⁶ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, p181

Shields LP&TC, Cambois and Burradon lodges were representative in sending three delegates each, then approximately 100 different organisations were represented at the conference.

These figures can be compared to large wholly 'official' Labour Party meetings. There is a considerable amount of variation on the number of delegates per organisation represented at these conferences. For example, at a NTFLP conference addressed by Morrison in October 1938 nearly 400 delegates represented 140 branches (averaging at just under three delegates per organisation). Yet at a Labour rally with Attlee speaking in Gateshead in November 1937 there were 700 Labour delegates representing 120 party organisations (averaging almost six delegates per organisation).⁴⁸ Thus, with representation of 100 separate organisations, the United Peace Alliance conference compares favourably with the official Labour conferences. However, if the United Peace Alliance conference included Liberal organisations, churches and other 'progressives' as well (there is no direct evidence of this but these bodies fall under the title 'progressive organisations') then this was a small figure given the very large number of such bodies in the north east at the time. For example, the DMA alone had 175 lodges in the period. Whatever the case, as has been pointed out above, there was only one such United Peace Alliance meeting in 1938, suggesting that the first conference could not have been particularly inspiring and that it did not establish any significant regional organisation dedicated to promoting the popular front. After this conference, only Blaydon provided evidence of political popular front activity and this petered out after June.

The Impact of the Munich Crisis, September-December 1938

The shock of the Munich settlement, which was perceived on the left as a betrayal of the Czechs in the face of naked German aggression, deepened fears of an international conflagration. This brought into sharp focus the need to adopt a strategy that could rapidly remove a government that seemed intent on buying off fascism at any price. By-elections at Oxford and Bridgwater in October and November 1938 suggested that the popular front at the polls could be made to work.⁴⁹ Jupp claimed that the victory of Vernon Bartlett, the 'progressive' candidate at Bridgwater, restored some of 'waning popularity' of the popular front.⁵⁰ Eatwell was more upbeat, arguing that the two results indicated a 'very promising' situation for the popular front.⁵¹ Previous north east popular front supporters used these events

⁴⁷ *Sunday Sun*, 9/5/37, p9

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 28/11/37, p3 and 23/10/38, p3

⁴⁹ See R. Eatwell, 'Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.6, No.4 (1971) pp122-139 and C. Cook & J. Ramsden, *By Elections in British Politics* (UCL Press, 1997) p112-129

⁵⁰ J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982) p115

⁵¹ R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p243

to press their arguments in favour of an anti-Chamberlain alliance. In late October 1938 C.P. Trevelyan told the Labour Spain Committee conference on Spain that the British labour movement 'must make events [...] It must not stand alone. It must collect all forces round it.[...] We ought to build a popular front at home, and by collaborating openly and constantly with the French parties of the left, and with the Russian government itself, build up a popular front of nations'.⁵² Trevelyan was also hopeful, feeling that a 'common front at Oxford [by-election] may lead to common sense at Transport House'.⁵³ Steve Lawther, operating under the guise of Winlaton branch of the National Guild of Co-operators, asked the north east 'co-operative and labour movement' what its attitude to the international crisis was and whether there would be a 'new line up' [presumably a popular front] against Chamberlain ('or', he asked, 'Are we to see fascism secure another success?')⁵⁴

The political uncertainty also appeared to change the minds of some who had previously opposed the popular front. Important in this context was Emmanuel Shinwell. At a Seaham DLP conference in late September, he admitted that whilst Labour had refused to ally itself with other progressive forces,

'we have always recognised that an emergency might arise which would justify joint action. That emergency seems to have arrived. No disloyalty to Labour principles would follow from united action which is intended to safeguard democracy; it is but plain common sense. Democracy throughout the world is looking for a lead. We can provide it. The danger is imminent, but there is still time to save the last strongholds of Europe, to defeat the dictators and move towards a real peace based on law and justice'.⁵⁵

Although Shinwell did not actually mention the popular front by name or define 'united action', this suggests support for it. Given the seriousness of the international crisis, this was the moment when the popular front was likely to have had its broadest appeal.

However, little more than a month later Shinwell once more appeared to have rejected the popular front. A Seaham DLP conference in Horden passed a resolution calling for the organisation of labour movement propaganda against fascism and the government. It also called upon the government to act against fascism. All affiliated branches were called upon to 'prepare their members to create an effective resistance to any attempts to impose anything

Eatwell argued that had it not been for Munich, it is unlikely that there would have been a progressive candidate at Oxford (p254).

⁵² C.P. Trevelyan Speech (hand-written notes and typescript versions), 23/10/38 (NRL, CPT183)

⁵³ Ibid.,

⁵⁴ To discuss these questions, the branch was to hold a congress at Winlaton on September 24 with Will Lawther to speak. Unfortunately there is no report of this congress.

Daily Worker (final edition), 5/9/38, p5

which resembles fascist policy and methods in this country'.⁵⁶ There was no mention at all of 'united action' nor of the popular front. It would seem that once again Shinwell saw salvation solely in terms of the labour movement.

Other north east Labour MPs may have become favourable to some kind of popular front in the immediate aftermath of Munich. Vernon Bartlett, a Liberal journalist and the progressive candidate at Bridgwater by-election in November 1938, received a letter of support from 39 Labour MPs including David Adams, Chuter Ede, Joshua Ritson and Tom Sexton from the north east.⁵⁷ If signing the letter signified support for the popular front, the presence of Sexton (Barnard Castle) is noteworthy as before this time he had been relatively uninterested in foreign affairs.⁵⁸ For example, in a debate on a 'no confidence' motion in the government over Eden's resignation, Sexton spoke 'with a certain amount of diffidence' as his 'main concern' in the Commons had been 'domestic affairs, and foreign affairs have seemed to be far away from most of the topics on which I have spoken [...]'.⁵⁹

However, it is not certain that supporting Bartlett *necessarily* indicated support for the popular front.⁶⁰ There appears to be no trace of the letter itself and all the NEC recorded was that it was a message to Bartlett 'wishing him success'.⁶¹ Other evidence suggests that the letter did not imply support for the popular front in general terms. For example, Chuter Ede's (South Shields) comments on Ellen Wilkinson's pro-popular front memorandum in December 1938. Ede thought that Labour could not hand power '*en bloc* to any alliance'.⁶² An extra fifty seats for Labour was not, for Ede, worth the problems entailed in an alliance and it was better to be a 'strong united opposition of the one party, than a weak coalition which always tended

⁵⁵ *Durham Chronicle*, 30/9/38, p9

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 4/11/38, p10

None of Shinwell's autobiographical works throw any light on this.

⁵⁷ NEC Organisation Sub-committee Minutes, 14/12/38

Eatwell noted that Ellen Wilkinson, who did not sign the letter, also supported Bartlett.

R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p273

⁵⁸ Sexton did, however, endorse the left wing paper *Tribune*.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 4/38, p7

⁵⁹ Parliamentary Debates, Vol.332,c.292-294, 22/2/38

Considering what Sexton went on to say, including some bizarre references to 'conversational lozenges', it is not surprising that he did not speak much on foreign affairs.

⁶⁰ Ellen Wilkinson did not sign the letter, but did, like Cripps and Pritt, support Bartlett. She continued to support the popular front, too.

R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p273

⁶¹ NEC Organisation Sub-committee Minutes, 14/12/38

⁶² Report on MPs comments, attached to A. Creech Jones MP letter to Ellen Wilkinson, 14/12/38 (MLHA, CP/IND/DUTT/31/03)

This was consistent with correspondence Ede had with Attlee and Dalton in October 1938. He regretted seeing some Labour Party members 'issuing manifestos against all forms of National Service' and asked Dalton about exposing the 'society influences' on government foreign policy. There was no mention at all of the popular front.

Ede letters to Attlee, 9/10/38; 26/10/38; Ede letter to Dalton, 10/10/38 and reply, 11/10/38 (SCRO, 390/10/15)

to break up' when the pressure was removed or 'at moments of difficulty'.⁶³ Labour must, Ede thought, remain a socialist party. If supporting Bartlett *did* indicate support for the popular front, then in Ede's case (as with Shinwell) it was very short lived indeed. Unfortunately, Ede was the only north east MP to leave a record of his thoughts on Wilkinson's memorandum. Sexton, Adams and Ritson may have also briefly supported the popular front, but they certainly did not support Cripps' popular front campaign in 1939. If support for Bartlett's specific candidature in a seat that was un-winnable for Labour indicated approval of the popular front as a national strategy, then this approval was very short-lived in most cases.

Just as support for Bartlett did not necessarily indicate advocacy of the popular front, so opposition to his candidature did not necessarily indicate opposition to the idea. As noted above, C.P. Trevelyan remained a popular front supporter after Munich. Yet, in response to a letter from the Liberal MP and popular front supporter Sir Richard Acland, Trevelyan refused to support Vernon Bartlett's candidature at Bridgwater. Whilst Trevelyan's actual response to Acland is not in his papers, Acland's response to Trevelyan's letter is. From this it can be determined that Trevelyan refused to support Bartlett as he was standing under a 'progressive' label and not a party one. Acland argued that a simple electoral agreement between the parties would not always work. Bridgwater, where Liberal and Labour polled roughly the same number of votes, was a prime example of the problem. Acland thought that only a progressive candidate could win Bridgwater. Though conceding that there was some truth in Trevelyan's claims that progressive MPs would be problematical in parliament, Acland thought that if there were enough progressive MPs they could form a link between the Liberal and Labour parties.⁶⁴ This revealed that Trevelyan's idea of a popular front at this time differed from that of many other popular fronters, as he did not support the idea of progressive candidatures. What it *does not* show, contrary to Pimlott's claim, was that Trevelyan opposed the popular front at this time and was a late convert (in 1939) to the idea.⁶⁵ As noted above, he supported the popular front in spring 1938 and was, in fact, quite an early convert. The fact that there were so many different ideas of what the popular front consisted of and how it was to operate was one of the major flaws of the whole project.

Another good example of this was the attitude of Hugh Dalton MP (Bishop Auckland), who had argued against the popular front in late 1936. Dalton asserted that it was wrong to compare Britain and France. There was, he claimed, an internal fascist threat in France which

⁶³ Ibid.,

⁶⁴ Richard Acland letter to C.P. Trevelyan, 26/10/38 and 31/10/38 (NRL, CPT153)

⁶⁵ B. Pimlott, *op cit.*, p240

did not exist in Britain.⁶⁶ Although, if fascism were to become a menace in Britain, Dalton accepted that this would force a reassessment of the situation. Another crucial difference was that in France the popular front consisted of three political parties of approximately equal voting strength that could come to an understanding easily. In Britain, Labour dominated the anti-fascist forces and was sufficiently powerful to win elections by itself. Labour only needed a 1¼ million vote turnover (less than 15% of the government's poll) to win a general election. This was entirely possible as the 1935 general election saw the Labour vote increase by 30% and the Conservative vote fall by more than 12%.⁶⁷ Dalton helped pen *Labour and the Popular Front* in May 1938 in response to the pro-popular front memorandum by Wilkinson *et al.*⁶⁸ Yet, at the time of Munich, Dalton engaged in talks with Conservatives in Parliament in an effort to build links and opposition to the government's appeasement policies. However, as Pimlott wrote, this was a 'quite different proposal from the traditional "united" and "popular" fronts'.⁶⁹ Dalton was interested in Parliamentary alliances, and certainly not in any alliance that included Communists. Dalton's view certainly differed strongly from that of Cripps as he opposed Cripps' campaign in 1939. This was not because he was opposed to the idea of anti-government forces working together. In fact, Dalton opposed Cripps' plan precisely because he thought that it precluded any possibility of reaching local agreements on anti-Chamberlain candidates at elections, particularly as Cripps had explicitly ruled out 'reactionary imperialists' of the Churchill type from his plan.⁷⁰

Even the very short-lived conversion to the popular front of people such as Shinwell (and possibly the four north east MPs who signed the Bartlett letter), was not reflected in the labour movement as a whole. There is surprisingly little evidence that the Munich crisis converted more of the north east labour movement to the popular front. At a Durham DLP committee meeting in early October Hetton LLP submitted a resolution stating that 'the time is now opportune to form a Popular Peace Front, & steps be taken to form the same'.⁷¹ However, it was not accepted by the meeting. There is only one other reference to the popular

⁶⁶ Left wingers, such as George Harvey, contested this. At a Labour meeting in January 1938 Harvey warned of the 'growing tendency towards fascism in this country' claiming it was 'honeycombed with fascism' and that 'the working classes must realise that they had either got to have socialism or fascism. That was the choice for them today'. Yet this attitude was not strictly consistent with support for the popular front, which necessitated the dropping of demands for socialism in order to appeal to those to the right (see chapter eight).

Chester-le-Street Chronicle, 28/1/38, p4

⁶⁷ H. Dalton, 'The Popular Front', *Political Quarterly*, (October-December 1936) pp481-489

⁶⁸ Dalton *et al* claimed that Labour had done well in four by-elections. Eatwell argued that the evidence of the by-elections cited was not so clearly in their favour.

R. Eatwell, (thesis) *op cit.*, p201

⁶⁹ B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) pp257-62

⁷⁰ R. Eatwell, (thesis) *op cit.*, p288 and B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, pp257-61

⁷¹ Durham DLP Minutes, 8/10/38 (DRO, D/SHO/93/2)

front in late 1938 and that was at a mass meeting at Crawcook in early December, under the auspices of Spennymoor DLP. Speaking on democracy, Len White called for a conference of democratic states and then spoke of the need to get rid of Chamberlain's government 'replacing them with a People's Front with the Labour Party as leaders'.⁷² Interestingly, Clem Attlee was present and spoke after White. Attlee began by describing White's speech as 'one of the best expositions of democracy he had heard', although he tactfully made no reference to the popular front idea itself.⁷³

What of the attitudes of the general populace in the north east? As with the national picture, it is very difficult to gauge the popular reaction to Munich.⁷⁴ Initially, the prospects looked positive for a popular front body such as the TJPC being able to capitalise on mass discontent at Munich and channel energies into a campaign for the popular front.⁷⁵ The TJPC held a hugely successful meeting in Newcastle in late September 1938 at which thousands were present. 'Seldom', commented the *North Mail*, 'had the Bigg Market [a market in the centre of Newcastle regularly used for public meetings] been so crowded'.⁷⁶ This meeting took on the appearance of a popular front as Enid Atkinson of the CAPR spoke. However, it is not clear if any of the speakers called for the formation of a popular front explicitly. In addition, this proved to be a false dawn for the TJPC and the popular front. A TJPC-organised conference on Spain and China drew only 20 delegates from the approximately 1,000 organisations and

⁷² *Blaydon Courier*, 2/12/38, p4

It is unclear if Len White was a local speaker or, like Attlee, an invited guest. This meeting was only reported in the *Blaydon Courier*, perhaps indicating that its editor was in favour of the popular front. A more likely scenario is that local left wingers ensured that reports of events they attended went to the paper, and the editor, lacking copy or wishing to ingratiate himself with local politicians, duly reported them. Likewise, on the other side of the political spectrum, reports of Economic League meetings also regularly appeared in the paper.

⁷³ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁴ C. Cook & J. Ramsden, *op cit.*, p128

Swift claimed that the popular front by-elections after Munich were evidence of the volatility of the electorate rather than the viability of the popular front.

J. Swift, 'Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931-40', Ph.D. Thesis, Lancaster University (1997) p276

⁷⁵ As seen in chapter one, the TJPC organised popular front events from 1936. This continued in 1937. For example, the TJPC organised 'Peace Week' (14 to 20 June 1937) which involved members of the CP, LNU, CAPR, Labour Party, Newcastle International Club, Newcastle branch of the International Friendship League, International Voluntary Service for Peace, Newcastle Esperanto Club and Independent MP Eleanor Rathbone *North Mail*, 7/6/37, p6; 16/6/37, p7; 17/6/37, p9; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 6/37, p5 and *Durham Chronicle*, 18/6/37, p4

The popular front nature of the TJPC was noted by a hostile 'Spectator' in February 1937 who asked: 'Is it [TJPC] other than an aggregation of out-and-out socialist and communist controlled organisations, with an air of respectability provided by a smattering of the bourgeoisie? So many bodies of mushroom growth trade under high-falutin [sic.] names - their aims and objects identical - that one becomes definitely suspicious that theirs is a common origin'.

North Mail, 15/2/37, p9

⁷⁶ *North Mail*, 26/9/38, p5

A TJPC resolution calling for the recall of Parliament and the need to protect Czechoslovakia received support from the labour movement and CAPR.

individuals invited. The conference, held in Gateshead, was addressed by the mayor who expressed his disappointment at the apathy. Whilst not an explicitly popular front event, this conference was organised by the popular front TJPC.⁷⁷ Given that the conference came a mere month after the very successful TJPC public meeting, the support it received was incredibly small. In the light of this conference, the May United Peace Alliance conference, held at an arguably less promising moment in 1938, was more of a success.

The disappointing October TJPC conference contrasts strongly with a DCFLP delegate conference to discuss Munich at about the same time. Dalton, Will Lawther and Sam Watson addressed the conference which was 'exceptionally well attended' (so much so that a loud speaker had to be employed to relay the speeches to people outside the DMA headquarters in Redhill, Durham).⁷⁸ There is no indication that any of the speakers, including Watson and Lawther, called for a popular front. Taken together, the failure of the TJPC conference and the success of the official labour movement conference suggests that, in the north east, salvation was still seen in terms of a Labour Party victory rather than through a popular front. If the success of the TJPC September meeting did represent potential for the popular front, it was very short lived indeed. Perhaps Shinwell's attitude (and also possibly Chuter Ede's) was representative of the north east population at large. The failure of the October TJPC conference is an indication of the barren ground on which popular front advocates had to sow their seed.

Munich may have given fresh stimulus to the peace movement in the north east, but this did not impact on the popular front. In December 1938, a national petition campaign co-ordinated by the National Peace Council and calling for a new international peace conference received 'very wide and encouraging support from all sections of the peace movement'.⁷⁹ Support came from Newcastle Co-operative Guild, Gateshead ILP, the Methodist Peace Fellowship, Friends Peace Council, Fellowship of Reconciliation and the PPU, whilst several other organisations were awaiting committee meetings before deciding on the issue. Thus there was a 'good chance' that Newcastle TC and the City Labour Party would support it (along

North Mail, 21/9/38, p5

⁷⁷ If, as above, three delegates per organisation are assumed, only seven organisations were represented, a positive response of less than 1%. Even if there was only one delegate per organisation present the response was only 2%.

Sunday Sun, 30/10/38, p13 and *North Mail*, 31/10/38, p7

⁷⁸ *Durham Chronicle*, 4/11/38, p11

⁷⁹ Herbert Richardson letter to C.P. Trevelyan, 4/12/38 (NRL, CPT153)

Present at a National Peace Council meeting in London on March 18, the lord mayor of Newcastle and mayor of Gateshead were among the 10,000 in the Newcastle and Gateshead boroughs who signed the petition for a new peace conference.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 1/39, p6 and *North Mail*, 13/3/39, p7

with the LNU) and that 'probably' the Liberals would co-operate too.⁸⁰ This campaign cannot be regarded as a popular front one, however. Fascists and pro-Chamberlain Tories wanted peace, thus a critique of Chamberlain's foreign policy was not the uniting factor in the campaign.⁸¹ C.P. Trevelyan's response to being asked to support the petition illustrates this point. Trevelyan, who later supported Cripps' popular front campaign, told the national organiser that he would not sign the letter as 'The Fascist tyrants seem to me to be far past the stage of reasonable discussion'.⁸² He thought that there was no chance of peace unless Britain stood up to Hitler and Mussolini and made an alliance with Russia and the democracies: 'kindly gestures of any other kind seem to me to be futile till that is done'.⁸³

Why Did the North East Labour Movement Fail to Support the Popular Front in 1938?

There is surprisingly little evidence of why the majority of the north east labour movement opposed, or at least did not support the popular front in 1938. The only popular front policy statement in the region came in early May 1938 when the Durham County Federation of Labour Parties (DCFLP) circularised its affiliates. The circular stated that the federation unanimously accepted the NEC's report that the Labour Party should not associate with political bodies that did not share its policy. It asserted that: 'However desirable, the expressed objects [of the popular front] can best be pursued within the ranks of our Party, as apart from the elementary principle of loyalty, the diffusion of effort and finance involved must inevitably weaken our organisation'.⁸⁴ In a reference to the ILP, the circular continued: 'Consider what has happened to those who have left the party'.⁸⁵ It then made another appeal to loyalty, and called for 'constant propaganda' to 'capture parliament, defend democracy and achieve socialism'.⁸⁶ These considerations, then, were paramount in the thinking of regional labour movement leaders.

The Labour Party and the Popular Front ended by stating that the success of a political party depended on the loyalty and staying power of its members and this had a strong

⁸⁰ Ibid.,

⁸¹ There were other organisations that could not be described as popular fronts. 'The Link' (whose membership grew rapidly in the late thirties, reaching 4,300 by summer 1939), grouped together a very diverse section of British society who were united by a desire to avoid war with Germany. In May 1939, Northampton branch, for example, included amongst its members: left wing socialists, Rotarians, Conservatives, a German, Quakers and members of the British Union (successor to the BUF), PPU and British Legion. Many members did not realise that 'The Link' was not simply a peace group but a pro-Nazi organisation. R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933-39* (Constable, 1980) pp307-315

⁸² C.P. Trevelyan letter to Richardson, 7/12/38 (NRL, CPT153)

⁸³ Ibid.,

⁸⁴ *North Mail*, 4/5/38, p4 and *Durham Chronicle*, 6/5/38, p5

⁸⁵ Ibid.,

⁸⁶ Ibid.,

resonance in the north east.⁸⁷ Loyalty to the party was emphasised in the DCFLP circular and, as with previous plans to promote association with Communists, played an important part in minimising popular front support. The lack of DMA support for the United Peace Alliance was crucial to its failure. Its loyalty to Labour was well demonstrated by its donation of £5,000 to the party in spring 1938. This was claimed to be the largest single contribution to the party by any one labour movement body. Support for the move within the DMA was overwhelming, as the lodge vote was 843-35 in favour.⁸⁸ Nothing occurred in 1938 which shook the firm belief in the DMA that Labour alone was capable of righting the deteriorating situation. What was this loyalty based on? It is unlikely that it was based on fear. As discussed above, the NEC did not discipline those in the north east who openly supported the popular front in 1938. If it was based on fear of the consequences of stepping out of line, then the fear was largely unfounded. As argued below, loyalty was also not based on satisfaction with the national leadership. Loyalty to Labour in the region was not blind and certainly did not accept everything the national leadership did or did not do. Rather, it appears to have been based on the belief that the labour movement was the best method of pursuing the interests of its members, regardless, and sometimes despite of, the leadership. As Murphy pointed out, with the outbreak of war likely, Labour calls for unity and loyalty were further strengthened.⁸⁹

Other problems with the popular front agitation in 1938 can be highlighted. As G.D.H. Cole pointed out, the United Peace Alliance campaign did not, unlike the 1937 Unity Campaign, 'have either a definite organising centre or a single focus'.⁹⁰ This perhaps explains the fact that only one regional conference was organised to marshal support for the project. Though, if there had been strong support for the popular front, it would surely not have been impossible for supporters to organise further conferences and propaganda events.

There were also problems with the popular front's programme. Roger Eatwell argued that the popular front movement in 1938 had no clear programme, although it could have united around Labour's *Immediate Programme* that was very tame and would not have alienated potential supporters from the right such as Liberals. This would also have precluded Labour objections that the movement was not socialist. However, the movement was not

⁸⁷ *The Labour Party and the Popular Front* (Labour Party Publication, 1938) p8

Jupp pointed out that Labour rejected the popular front with far more reasoned argument than it had used against the united front.

J. Jupp, op cit., p114

⁸⁸ *Durham Chronicle*, 7/1/38, p11 and 18/2/38, p7

⁸⁹ D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p384

⁹⁰ G.D.H. Cole, op cit., p353

Jupp echoed this point.

cohesive enough to agree a programme and this allowed Labour to argue that it was a betrayal of its policies and, by association, socialism. It could therefore not overcome official Labour opposition, which was the most important barrier to the formation of a popular front.⁹¹

Moreover, the programme of the United Peace Alliance, such as it was, was concerned with foreign policy 'virtually to the exclusion' of domestic policies.⁹² It was fundamentally an expression of radical liberalism, which differentiated it from the previous united front campaigns and suggests a reason why it did not gain much support in the north east.⁹³ As noted above, Tom Sexton MP seldom commented on foreign affairs. At least one other north east Labour MP shared Sexton's general lack of interest in foreign affairs. Joe Batey MP (Spennymoor) might have been expected to show some interest after his calling for a united front or a popular front at the DMA anti-Means Test protest in August 1936 (see chapter one). Perhaps Batey's lack of support for the popular front was due to his relative lack of interest in foreign affairs. This was illustrated by a speech at the Spennymoor DLP AGM in April 1938. Whilst asserting that Chamberlain must go, Batey expressed the hope that the government would spend less time on foreign affairs and more on reforming the Means Test and pensions and tackling unemployment. He continued to talk on domestic matters such as the Coal Bill and largely ignored foreign affairs.⁹⁴ The popular front, which dealt largely with foreign affairs, was not capable of attracting people like Batey and Sexton. However, it would be wrong to overstate this, as neither seem to have been attracted by the united front programme, which did cover domestic matters. In this case, the apparent introverted and parochial nature of these concerns was a reflection of the dire situation the region found itself in, rather than a manifestation of a general insularity that, as argued before, characterised the attitudes of some in the north east. It is possible that the attitudes of people like Batey and Sexton, completely understandable given the chronic poverty and unemployment in the north east, were shared by the majority of their constituents. If they were, they do not seem to have been shared by the majority of labour movement activists in the region who, as noted in earlier chapters, were active on Spain and, after early 1937, tended not to mount large demonstrations on domestic issues such as the Means Test. Thus Batey and Sexton's attitudes were out of step with many labour movement activists in the region. A lack of interest in foreign affairs was certainly not the reason why the regional labour movement did not support the popular front.

J. Jupp, *op cit.*, p114

⁹¹ R. Eatwell, (thesis) *op cit.*, pp214-216

⁹² J. Jupp, *op cit.*, p111

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p120 and D.L. Murphy, *op cit.*, p411

⁹⁴ *Durham Chronicle*, 15/4/38, p11 and 21/8/36, p16

Insularity was perhaps implicit in the attitude of another north east MP at time of Munich. In late October 1938, W.J. Stewart MP (Houghton-le-Spring) said that 'during the crisis he came to the conclusion that there would never be a war. He had never budged from that opinion but he thought the carving up of Czechoslovakia was cruel, wrong and unnecessary'.⁹⁵ This kind of complacency was certainly not conducive to support for the popular front: there was no need for drastic measures such as a popular front if the international situation was not perceived as being particularly serious. However, the extent to which this perspective characterised general attitudes is unclear.

Even if the popular front programme had included domestic issues and was, as Eatwell argued, based on Labour's *Immediate Programme*, it still proposed an alliance with Communists and Liberals, both of which offended large sections of the labour movement.⁹⁶ For example, Wansbeck Labour PPC William Maclean, addressing Wansbeck DLP annual meeting in March 1938, rejected 'new alliances to left or right' as they made for 'parliamentary weakness'.⁹⁷ Alliances demanded compromise too. J. Henderson (who did not reveal his party affiliation) thought: 'Popular front is the wrong name. Unpopular front is truer.[...] Any party which stands for certain definite principles will find that many of those principles will have to be thrown overboard if it is necessary to curry favour with supporters from other parties'.⁹⁸ Labour's problems with an alliance to the left can be swiftly dealt with as the objections were merely transferred from the case against the united front.⁹⁹ Nationally, one of Labour's key

⁹⁵ Ibid., 28/10/38, p6

⁹⁶ Labour's case against the popular front would been far weaker if it had not included Communists. Eatwell argued that the majority of the Labour Party would not co-operate with Communists under any circumstances (and neither would the Conservative dissidents) but that many in Labour would co-operate with Liberals and Conservatives. This implies that an alliance of Labour, Liberals and dissident Conservatives that explicitly excluded Communists (such as that desired by Labour Party member A.L. Rowse) had a far greater chance of success than one including Communists. Yet could such an alliance be rightly deemed a popular front? Eatwell's definition meant that any alliance that excluded Communists could not be regarded as a popular front. (For example, in his discussion of Labour's talks with dissident Conservatives in 1938, Eatwell noted that the Conservatives were suspicious of the CP, so the putative alliance was not a popular front). Eatwell did not reveal why he thought a popular front had to contain Communists. As the strategy was first proclaimed to the world by French Communists in 1934, perhaps he thought that a popular front had to include those who had originated the idea. Of course, as Swift pointed out, any attempt to exclude Communists from an alliance would have been opposed by the Labour left.

R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., pp173-4, 238 and J. Swift, op cit., p279

⁹⁷ Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 19/3/38 (NRON, 527/A/3)

⁹⁸ *Blaydon Courier*, 13/5/38, p5

As noted above, this was also part of Shinwell's case against the popular front.

⁹⁹ Though the CP had always been to the left of Labour politically, Murphy argued that by 1939 its popular front programme placed it to the right of the Labour Party. Maclean's quote illustrates that the CP was still seen by Labour Party members as being to its left, though the reality of its political programme perhaps suggested otherwise. With this argument, Murphy attached too much importance to party programmes. Implicit in Murphy's own study is the impression that the CP membership remained, on the whole, more militant than that of Labour, regardless of the parties' respective official programmes.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., p435

arguments against the popular front was that it included Communists and all the problems this would bring.¹⁰⁰ Attlee, for example, opposed co-operation with Communists publicly and privately as the CP was small and would alienate many. There was also no reason to trust the CP, which, until relatively recently, had spent years attacking Labour leaders.¹⁰¹ Labour in the north east spent very little time condemning Communists, but there was very little support for their ventures. The CP remained relatively small and un-influential in the region, thus its calls for a popular front would not have been heard. The party also had very little electoral influence in the region, certainly not enough to win Labour a marginal seat. In fact, its support was seen as more of a vote loser. Moreover, residual sectarianism in the north east CP would also not have aided advancement of the popular front, though the regional party largely appears to have supported the strategy. Yet, as noted regarding Murphy's comment on Labour opposition to the united front, there was no evidence that events in the Soviet Union, particularly the Show Trials, had any effect on attitudes within the north east labour movement.¹⁰²

The popular front also, of course, introduced the prospect of an alliance to the right of Labour too. This produced a large number of additional reasons to oppose the strategy and these were also emphasised by the Labour leadership. Jupp claimed that NEC attacks on non-socialists and the idea of class collaboration 'probably aroused more sympathy among the party membership [...]'¹⁰³ In proposing the popular front the left 'broke with the tradition of the labour movement. According to this tradition independence from the other two major parties was the reason for the existence of the Labour Party'.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the Liberal Party was not the electoral force it once had been. In the 1935 general election the Liberal Party received its lowest ever vote. In 1936, Liberals only had 189 constituency associations and less than a third of these were notably active.¹⁰⁵ Attlee opposed the popular front partly because of the Liberals' weakness. Due to the existence of local electoral pacts between Liberals and Conservatives, it is difficult to determine where Liberals were active in north east local elections in the late thirties. If the 1935 general election is an accurate reflection of Liberal strength in the region, then Liberals only had a significant presence in Barnard Castle and Bishop Auckland in the south of County Durham, and South Shields and Tynemouth on the Tyne. Labour was very unlikely to desire an alliance with parties that were not as influential as they had been on the past (especially as Labour won three of these four seats in 1935).

¹⁰⁰ R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p208 and D.L. Murphy, op cit., p386

¹⁰¹ J. Swift, op cit., pp267 and 274

¹⁰² D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp386 and 403

¹⁰³ J. Jupp, op cit., p122

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p124

¹⁰⁵ R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p206

As Eatwell noted, there was Labour support for the United Peace Alliance in areas where the situation seemed hopeless for Labour, such as Cornwall.¹⁰⁶ This was not the case in the north east. A Liberal stronghold before the first world war, the north east was divided between supporters of the National Government and Labour after 1935.¹⁰⁷ Electoral expediency in the north east meant that popular front supporters were always going to have problems convincing the labour movement in County Durham. As Ellen Wilkinson admitted in January 1939, the situation in County Durham was 'not so serious because of the strong position the party holds in that area'.¹⁰⁸ Of the fifteen County Durham seats covered by this study (Sunderland was a two member constituency) Labour won twelve in 1935.¹⁰⁹ In 1935, thirteen of the fifteen election contests in County Durham were straight fights. Of these one was between Labour and Liberal (Bishop Auckland) and the rest were between Labour and National Government candidates. A popular front pact would have meant no Liberal opposition to Labour in Bishop Auckland, but Labour won there anyway. In the other straight fights, there is no indication that a Liberal alliance with Labour would have helped the party. In fact, where Liberals stood as an independent third party it seems to have benefited Labour by taking votes from the Conservatives, for example in Barnard Castle in 1935. In 1931 Labour lost in a straight fight to the Conservatives in the seat. In 1935 the Labour share of the vote increased from 44.7% to 49.8%, the Conservative vote decreasing from 55.3% to 44.15%. The Liberal secured just 6.1%, but this looks as though it was at the expense of the Conservative.¹¹⁰ This suggests that when not given the choice of a Liberal candidate, Liberal voters generally opted for Conservatives rather than Labour in the region. G.L. Dodds claimed that, with the collapse of the local Liberal Party, the Conservatives received the Liberal vote,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p194

¹⁰⁷ For details, see Bill Purdue's article. Purdue argued that Liberalism was still a strong force in the north east in 1914, suggesting that the effects of war were crucial in explaining Labour's rise. Yet Purdue's argument is not wholly convincing as he did not attempt to explain why it was that, given Labour's weakness in 1914, County Durham became the first Labour-controlled county council in the country in 1919. Purdue's argument necessitates accepting that a huge amount of political change could occur within the space of only five years (albeit years of war) after 1914.

A.W. Purdue, 'The Liberal and Labour Parties in North East Politics 1900-1914: the Struggle for Supremacy', *International Review of Social History*, Vol.26, No.1 (1981) pp1-24

Duncan Tanner also claimed that Liberalism held up well in the north east before 1914.

D. Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) passim

¹⁰⁸ *Shields Gazette*, 23/1/39, p3

¹⁰⁹ The two Sunderland seats and Gateshead were the only ones Labour did not win. Thus when arguing for the popular front at a Sunderland Communist crusade meeting Reg Bishop could only really cite the town as an example of one which should be a 'backbone Labour seat' but which could not be won by Labour without progressive support. This contention was by no means certain, however.

Daily Worker (first edition), 20/2/39, p5

¹¹⁰ F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949* (Macmillan, revised edition, 1977) pp136, 196, 201-204, 247, 254-255, 260, 338-348 and 440-442.

thereby winning the two Sunderland seats in 1931.¹¹¹ That the presence of three parties helped Labour was also revealed in South Shields. In 1931 there was a straight fight between Liberal and Labour, the Liberal winning with 59.8%. In 1935 a National Labour candidate received 23.6 % of the vote, most of which must have come from the Liberal who took 28.3%. This allowed Labour to win the seat on 48.1%. There was no guarantee that, in the absence of a Liberal candidate in South Shields, Liberal voters would vote Labour if their party was aligned with it in a pact. The two South Shields results suggest that much of the Liberal vote in 1931 was in fact Conservative and that, with a section of Liberals again an independent electoral force, this divided the anti-Labour vote and thereby benefited Labour.¹¹² The evidence of Barnard Castle and South Shields suggests that Dalton was right to argue in 1936, in his case against the popular front, that it was unlikely that a Lib/Lab pact would have induced many Liberals voters to vote for a Labour candidate.¹¹³ Certainly, given that Liberal voters seem to have generally favoured the political right, the prospect of a relatively left wing Liberal candidate would certainly have caused some consternation and confusion in the regional Liberal electorate.

Labour was far weaker in Northumberland, winning only one of nine seats in the county. Ostensibly, the practical electoral case for the popular front in Northumberland was far stronger. Yet only at Tynemouth was there a possibility that anti-government forces could benefit from electoral unity. From 1922 Liberals and Labour secured a little less than a third of the vote each allowing the Conservative victory on a minority vote. In 1935, Labour came second in the constituency for the first time. Again, though, it is not certain that the absence of a Liberal candidate would have induced Liberal voters to vote Labour. Moreover, it is not clear what Labour voters would have done if a popular front Liberal candidate had stood.¹¹⁴ Elsewhere in Northumberland, Labour fought against solely government candidates, winning at Morpeth. In the seven straight fights that Labour lost to government candidates north of the Tyne, the presence of Liberal candidates, as at Barnard Castle, could well have helped them by taking votes from the Conservatives. Of course, popular front supporters could cite the

¹¹¹ GL. Dodds, *A History of Sunderland* (Albion Press, Sunderland, 1995) p99

¹¹² It appeared that South Shields was to be the only seat in the north east with a Liberal standing against a National Liberal after 1935 as H.W. Pilkington became National Liberal PPC for the seat. Presumably this was because, though the National Labour candidate won some support from the Liberal, it was calculated that a Liberal banner was likely to secure more support.

Sunday Sun, 9/10/38, p11

Thorpe explained the Labour losses in 1931 as partly the result of a lack of independent Liberal candidates and therefore three-way election contests.

A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p273

¹¹³ H. Dalton, *op cit.*, p486

national picture in arguing their case, or assert that the popular front was about creating a mass anti-government movement in the here-and-now rather than a simple electoral pact at election time. Had the electoral situation in the north east suggested more strongly that a Liberal-Labour pact would be advantageous, this could only have assisted popular front advocates. Yet, as with Labour electoral co-operation with Communists, if there was no *ideological commitment* to a pact, then even an extremely strong practical case would have had little or no effect.

Regardless of these considerations, the situation for Labour in the north east was evidently not hopeless. The popular front seemed defeatist, especially in a region where Labour was far from defeated.¹¹⁵ The anti-popular front DCFLP circular was far from defeatist as it appealed 'earnestly to our organisations to plan for victory [and] to extend their efforts'.¹¹⁶ Now that the progressive element of north east political opinion had moved from Liberal to Labour, the new dominant power was not likely to want help from what appeared a spent force. What is more, there is little as strong as the zeal of the convert. The popular front appeared to represent the renunciation of independence and a return to Lib/Labism, a tactic that had been discredited in the eyes of many in the labour movement.¹¹⁷ In fact, some Labour leaders feared that a popular front alliance would actually stimulate a Liberal revival.¹¹⁸ This fear must also have characterised the attitudes of some north east labour movement leaders, although there is no direct evidence of this. The north east was very much like West Yorkshire, an industrial area dominated by the Labour Party and wedded to the idea of Labour as an independent force.¹¹⁹ There was a further consideration in the north east. Eatwell claimed that, when arguing against the popular front, Labour could not cite Liberal opposition to it, as many key Liberals in fact supported the idea.¹²⁰ However, as will be seen in chapter seven, there is hardly any evidence of Liberal support for the popular front, so this was yet another reason why Labour in the north east should also oppose it.

In the labour movement, the popular front received support largely from the left wingers who had supported the united front before. Yet, the popular front did not even

¹¹⁴ These considerations provide support for Acland's contention (discussed above) that 'progressive' candidatures were a good tactic.

¹¹⁵ Murphy thought the popular front strategy revealed the Communist's lack of confidence in the organised working class to institute change.

D.L. Murphy, op cit., p294

¹¹⁶ *North Mail*, 4/5/38, p4 and *Durham Chronicle*, 6/5/38, p5

¹¹⁷ D.L. Murphy, op cit., pp382-7,440

Contrary to Murphy, Lib/Labism was not interchangeable with 'class collaboration', see footnote 141.

¹¹⁸ R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p205

¹¹⁹ D.L. Murphy, op cit., p411

¹²⁰ R. Eatwell, (thesis) op cit., p208

mobilise all of the Labour left. An important example of this was Jim Stephenson, a significant figure in Blaydon Labour Party who was heavily involved in united front agitation as well as the TJPC.¹²¹ Yet Stephenson's name was conspicuous by its absence in Blaydon Labour Party activity on the popular front in 1938. In all the reports of his speeches and letters to newspapers he expressed no explicit support for the idea. An ILP member as late as 1934, it is likely that his absence from this particular campaign was because he shared the ILP's analysis of the popular front. The extent to which the ILP's criticisms of the popular front affected the attitudes of the Labour left is unclear, but it must have had some kind of bearing.

As argued above, the relative disinterest in foreign affairs of north east Labour MPs like Batey and Sexton, explains their opposition to, or disinterest in, the popular front project, but it does not explain why many labour movement activists in the region who *were* active on Spain did not support the popular front. Another reason for the lack of labour movement support for the popular front in the north east must be that, as with the Unity Campaign of the previous year, Spain acted as a *distraction from the popular front*, rather than a compliment to it.¹²² Labour had moved from its previous position to, in 1937, official and more active opposition to non-intervention in Spain and support for (or least not opposition to) Britain's re-armament programme in order to provide a military response to the international fascist threat.¹²³ Yet this *did not* placate unease in the regional labour movement over the national leadership's role on Spain and the international situation. In fact, totally the contrary. In March 1938 the Northumberland Miners' Association (NMA) condemned the German invasion of Austria and demanded Hitler's immediate withdrawal. To help accomplish this, the NMA called upon the TUC and the NEC to convene a national conference 'with a view to driving out the Chamberlain government and establishing common action in defence of peace and liberty [...]'.¹²⁴ This was not a call for a popular front as the NMA statement continued; '*Labour has the power to stop Chamberlain*, and in the opinion of our council the first step in

¹²¹ In January 1939 Stephenson was, amongst others, secretary of Blaydon and Winlaton Labour Party. *Blaydon Courier*, 20/1/39, p8

¹²² Of course, this did work the other way round. For example, C.P. Trevelyan made a large donation to Cripps' popular front campaign in 1939 rather than an 'Aid Spain' campaign in 1939 (see chapter six).

¹²³ The increased activity on Spain and the reforming of the Labour League of Youth (LLY), which was disbanded in 1936 due to its support for the united front, suggested a trend to the left. Yet, as pointed out, the left wing thought Labour's modified position on rearmament represented a move to the right and that it inhibited the campaign against Chamberlain. Moreover, the experience of the LLY in 1939 revealed that nothing had fundamentally changed in the leadership mentality. Another element of this change was the fact that the 1937 Labour conference gave constituency parties more of a voice on the NEC. Jupp claimed that this satisfied many in the DLPs and was a factor that weakened the United Peace Alliance. This may have been the case in the north east, but it was not the case for Arthur Blenkinsop who was involved in the Constituency Parties Movement and openly supported the United Peace Alliance. J. Jupp, *op cit.*, pp112, 116 and 154

the mobilisation of its forces should be a national conference of the Movement' [my emphasis].¹²⁵ The NMA expressed its dissatisfaction with the TUC's refusal to act and again called for a conference. It also pressed for the MFGB to demand a conference, which it subsequently did.¹²⁶ This was the first of many. Between April and July, South Shields LP&TC, Houghton-le-Spring, Seaham and Newcastle East DLPs, and both the NTFLP and DCFLP all made separate calls for the NEC to convene a national conference on Spain and the international situation.¹²⁷ In addition, an NEFTC, NTFLP and Co-operative Party conference on the international situation in June 1938 made an identical request.¹²⁸ Effectively, almost the entire north east labour movement desired an emergency conference of the labour movement on Spain or the general international situation in mid-1938. Though Transport House refused to move, there was clearly very widespread dissatisfaction in the north east with the national labour movement's leadership.

Yet this disaffection did not lead most DLPs into the arms of popular fronters. The self-same report that noted the strong support for a national Labour conference in May 1938 also stated that County Durham and Northumberland 'will be solid for the party' [i.e. anti-popular front].¹²⁹ This evidence forces a reassessment of a previous historical account. To be successful, United Peace Alliance supporters realised that official support from Labour was vital.¹³⁰ Roger Eatwell claimed that popular front supporters made calls for a special labour movement conference in 1938 so that they could force a discussion of the popular front. For this reason, the NEC refused to hold such a conference as it would have been about the popular front.¹³¹ Of course, some popular fronters did support the idea of a conference and were likely to have attempted to use it to push their arguments. For example, Cripps, who proposed the motion for a special conference on the international situation in the NEC in May, 1938. Yet Cripps' motion was seconded by J.E. Swan of the DMA who was certainly not a

¹²⁴ Council meeting, 14/3/38, NMA AR, 1938 (NROM, 759/68)

¹²⁵ Ibid.,

This was probably stimulated by a letter from Cambois lodge requesting the NMA executive to organise an 'extensive' political campaign against government foreign policy.

EC meeting, 25/3/38, NMA AR, 1938 (NROM, 759/68)

¹²⁶ Ibid., 5/4/38

¹²⁷ South Shields LP&TC Minutes, party special meeting, 24/4/38; TC executive meetings, 12/4/38; 6/5/38; 5/7/38; 15/7/38; party executive meetings, 6/5/38 and 3/6/38 (SSPL, LPM6); NEC Minutes, 5/5/38; *Durham Chronicle*, 8/4/38, p5 and 24/6/38, p7

¹²⁸ *North Mail*, 20/6/38, p7

¹²⁹ The DCFLP's support was recorded, as was the individual support of the NEC attitude from Chester-le-Street, Sedgefield and Morpeth DLPs. (As mentioned above, this was not strictly true for County Durham as Blaydon Labour Party and Jarrow LP&TC supported the peace alliance in the county).

NEC Minutes, 5/5/38

¹³⁰ J. Jupp, op cit., p113

¹³¹ R. Eatwell, op cit., pp225-7

popular front supporter.¹³² Surely Swan was more representative of the majority of the 126 Borough Labour Parties and DLPs and four federations of Labour Parties calling for a national conference which *did not desire a popular front*, contrary to the implication of Eatwell's account. The north east, which provided the support of one of the four federations of Labour Parties (DCFLP support came later than his NEC report), certainly did not.¹³³ The only way in which Eatwell's account could have been realistic was if all the north east DLPs supported a popular front but kept this support completely secret (and openly pronounced against the popular front), in the hope of securing a national conference and then ambushing the national leadership by launching their campaign at it. This scenario is too far-fetched to have any credibility and the extant minutes of the north east DLPs reveal no such attitude. Given this evidence, it is likely that the Labour leadership avoided staging a national conference because it wished to avoid general criticism of its inactivity and attitude, rather than a debate over the popular front. More importantly, national leaders did not want to actively mobilise their membership.¹³⁴ The call by a NEFTC, NTFLP and Co-operative Party conference on the international situation in June 1938 for a national labour movement conference 'to formulate *industrial and political action to remove the Chamberlain government*' [my emphasis] must have scared many national leaders.¹³⁵

As the north east, and surely many other DLPs, wanted a national conference but not the popular front, it is unlikely that popular front supporters would have been able to divert the conference from discussing the international situation to debating the popular front. And had they managed to do so, it is very unlikely that they would have been able to convert the very considerable dissatisfaction with the leadership into support for their cause. The vast majority of the north east labour movement, and other dissenting DLPs throughout the nation, wanted

¹³² The motion was defeated by the casting vote of the chairperson.

NEC Minutes, 5/5/38

¹³³ South Shields LP&TC was one of very few organisations that supported both the popular front and a national labour movement conference on the international situation in 1938.

¹³⁴ A constant theme throughout Tom Buchanan's study is the Labour leadership's fear of the consequences of politically mobilising its membership. Labour leaders rejected extra-parliamentary pressure as they thought it would destabilise the labour movement as much as the government. Citrine argued that industrial action was both against the 1927 Trades Disputes Act and unpopular with the public. Buchanan argued that without the initiative being taken by the leaders, it was unlikely that the rank-and-file would act and that the attitude of British Labour leaders killed off any prospect of international solidarity action with the Spanish Republic. T. Buchanan, *op cit.*, pp37-136

Jack Common provided an insightful explanation of why 'the average labour-leader presents such a picture of over-contentment hedged about with timidity; why he is so often personally retreating at a moment when his cause is winning all the way along the line'. Of course, Common's comments only explained the behaviour of working class Labour leaders.

See 'The Private Inferiority of the Worker', in J. Common, *Freedom of the Streets* (People's Publications, 1988, first published by Secker & Warburg, 1938) p33

¹³⁵ *North Mail*, 20/6/38, p7

the national movement to become more active on Spain and the international situation. But it was clear throughout that the regional attitude was characterised by a feeling that the movement was perfectly capable of dealing with the situation alone, without the need of either a united or popular front, if only the national leadership would use the massive resources at their disposal more effectively. It was no coincidence that the anti-popular front DCFLP circular of May 1938 ended with an appeal for its affiliates to organise large demonstrations in each division for financial aid to the Spanish Republic.¹³⁶ North east DLPs were very interested in Spain and the international situation but this, if anything, distracted them from the popular front. What it did not do is make any of them popular front supporters. This was ironic given that it was the (predominantly or entirely) Communist IB delegation that approached the NMA in April 1938 which led to the north east labour movement conference in June. Presumably these Communists had desired a regional conference as they predicted that it would call for a national conference at which it would support the popular front. All the Communist IB delegation had done was prompt the regional movement to place pressure on its leadership to act, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of that leadership. The leaderships' refusal to act paid no dividends to popular front supporters either inside or outside the official labour movement. If anything, the Communists had merely helped demonstrate just how strong the ties of loyalty were in the regional labour movement, regardless of the national leaderships' obstinate refusal to act.¹³⁷ Not only does this evidence reveal the full extent of the popular front's failure to capitalise on discontent within the official labour movement rank-and-file, it also suggests a further reason for this failure. The appeal to Liberals and the middle class in general inherent in the popular front strategy required the CP to tone-down its policies and rhetoric. Thus the CP no longer nationally advocated direct action for political ends, at a time when such a policy would have had a significant resonance in the official movement.¹³⁸ For a section of the official

¹³⁶ Ibid., 4/5/38, p4 and *Durham Chronicle*, 6/5/38, p5

¹³⁷ The regional labour movement could do little without national support. Unilateral industrial action in one part of the country would not place sufficient pressure on the government to have any effect and would have isolated the regional movement from the national one. To have any hope of success, the action had to be concerted and national. Thus, when the NMA responded to the Cambois lodge letter requesting that it embark on a campaign against government foreign policy, the executive responded; 'while we give our blessing to the suggested campaign, and are prepared to do all in our power to make it a success, we trust that *all parties will do their very best towards that end*' [my emphasis].

EC meeting, 25/3/38, NMA AR, 1938 (NROM, 759/68)

¹³⁸ National leaders with a power base in the north east predictably ruled out the use of industrial action for political ends. At a DCFLP delegate conference after Munich, Dalton argued that a general strike could not be used to bring the government 'to its senses' as this was not democratic.

Durham Chronicle, 4/11/38, p11

labour movement rank-and-file, the popular front policy was simply 'too Liberal' to have any appeal.¹³⁹

The comments of a Labour PPC who opposed the popular front highlight another more general point. William Maclean argued that within Labour 'there can exist many approaches and many angles of vision' which will make the party 'in the true sense, a popular front'.¹⁴⁰ One of the reasons that Labour did not need a popular front was because, in some senses, *it already was one*. As discussed in chapter two, the labour movement comprised many diverse elements which included trade unionists who were not necessarily Labour supporters, revolutionary socialists, people with liberal or more moderate views, Catholics and non-Catholics, the working, middle and upper classes.¹⁴¹ In 1932 R.H. Tawney wrote that: 'If variety of educational experience and economic conditions among its active supporters be the tests, the Labour Party is, whether fortunately or not, as a mere matter of fact, less of a class party than any other British party'.¹⁴² The very level of bickering and disputes within the regional movement also testifies to its diversity. As with the united front campaigns, this was a further factor that worked against those seeking an alliance with outside forces: it was difficult enough ensuring some semblance of internal unity. The labour movement was already a very broad church and there is no doubt that there was room in it for anyone who could accept its relatively mild domestic policies and who desired a stronger stand against the fascist powers. Moreover, it excluded Communists (at least theoretically if not necessarily in practice), which would have put off many to the right of Labour. As mentioned above, Eatwell argued that a popular front could have been mobilised around Labour's *Immediate Programme*. If that was

¹³⁹ This aspect is discussed at greater length in chapter eight.

¹⁴⁰ Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 19/3/38 (NRON, 527/A/3)

¹⁴¹ This is not the impression given in some historical accounts, such as that of Dylan Murphy. For example, in discussing attitudes to the popular front in West Yorkshire labour movement, Murphy claimed that the popular front strategy, which entailed class collaboration, had no effect in a labour movement and working class wedded to the idea of Labour as an independent force committed to socialism. (D.L. Murphy, op cit., p411) The comment that the popular front entailed class collaboration implies that the Labour Party was a purely working class party. In fact, though dominated numerically by the working class, the party can be perceived as a practical expression of class collaboration, as testified to by, for example, the presence of middle class leadership figures such as Dalton and Attlee. Murphy also implied that there was uniform adherence to what he depicted as Labour's 'socialist' policy. Of course, definitions of socialism differ greatly, but this still implicitly denies the very diverse ideologies individual Labour Party members had. Some were far more 'socialist', and others far less so, than the party programme. It is a little perverse that Murphy rightly emphasised the diversity within the CP and yet implied a greater homogeneity in the Labour Party, a far larger and more diverse organisation. Furthermore, Labour's independence can be questioned. As Brockway pointed out; Labour 'has so far rejected the proposal of a Popular Front alliance with the Liberal Party, but it pursues a policy of constant compromise with the Capitalist class and identifies itself completely with the Capitalist State'.

F. Brockway, *The Workers Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) p184

¹⁴² In *Political Quarterly*, III (1932) p333, quoted in M. Pugh, "'Class Traitors": Conservative Recruits to Labour, 1900-30', *English Historical Review*, Vol.63, No.450 (1998) p40

Martin Pugh noted that the Labour governments of 1924, 1929-31 and 1945 were the most representative of British society as a whole (p40).

the case, then it surely would have been simpler for popular front supporters to join the party that already had that programme, rather than attempt to engineer an alliance with all its attendant problems.¹⁴³ These 'popular fronters' could then have attempted to force the leadership to take a more active stand on its policies. As noted above, despite a lot of pressure to do this, the leadership resisted calls for a national conference. Still, it was more likely to listen to its own members than it was to Liberals and others outside of the party.

Maclean's attitude appears to have characterised that of many in the north east. He approved of a diverse Labour Party. Moreover, he implicitly criticised the NEC by saying: 'unity is strength but unity does not mean rigid regimentation and heresy hunting'.¹⁴⁴ There was very little witch hunting in the north east over the Unity Campaign and, as far as is known, no one at all was disciplined in the region for supporting the popular front in 1938. Though the majority did not support the popular front, they did not crush those who did. The region was a good deal more tolerant of its heretics than was the national movement. On saying that, the NEC, though well aware of those who supported the popular front in the north east, did not act against them. Also as with the Unity Campaign, opposition was manifest only in the poor support the campaign received. Apart from the DCFLP circular and the comments of a handful of Labour figures, there was little actual condemnation of the popular front. This contrasted with Labour's attitude nationally. Eatwell pointed out that the *Daily Herald*, with the second largest newspaper circulation in Britain, was a constant critic of the popular front and helped keep its support small.¹⁴⁵ This sort of propaganda must have had an effect on attitudes in the north east.

In summary, the popular front drew very little support in the north east, despite the deteriorating international situation that climaxed with the Munich agreement in September 1938. A handful of Labour politicians may have briefly supported a popular front at that time, but if they did their support was very short-lived. The general feeling in the north east labour movement was of a desire for independence. There was strong disquiet at the national leadership's behaviour but this did not translate into support for the popular front. Alliances to the left and right brought more problems than they solved, and there was plenty of room for any popular front supporter within the Labour Party. It was clear that, apart from the small Communist influenced Labour left, most in the north east labour movement saw their

¹⁴³ This was what people such as Attlee thought. Swift argued that Attlee was reasonable to suggest that Liberals and the CP, as smaller parties, should drop their differences with Labour and not the other way round. J. Swift, *op cit.*, p274

¹⁴⁴ Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 19/3/38 (NRON, 527/A/3)

¹⁴⁵ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, p188

movement as sufficient in itself to rectify the situation, if only the leadership would take a firmer lead and discuss tactics with the membership. Even the leadership's refusal to do this did not spawn great support for the popular front. Did the situation improve for the popular front in 1939? The following chapter discusses the Cripps Petition Campaign.

CHAPTER SIX

The Cripps Petition Campaign, 1939

In January 1939 Stafford Cripps presented the NEC with a memorandum arguing that Labour would not be able to win the next election without an electoral alliance of 'all opposition parties'.¹ With the proposal decisively rejected by the NEC, Cripps embarked on a national campaign in order to rally support and convince the NEC to change its mind. The north east figured prominently from the outset as Cripps chose Newcastle to launch his Petition Campaign at a meeting on Sunday 5 February 1939. At the meeting, Cripps unveiled his petition which was to collect the names of all those who supported his plan. *Tribune* reported that the meeting was an 'amazing experience' and provided 'as good a launching as ever had any ship'.² The *Newcastle Journal*, remarked on the 'amazing scenes of enthusiasm'.³ Unlike the United Peace Alliance campaign of the previous year, Cripps' campaign had a definite organising centre and a figurehead. The campaign also sparked more controversy in the north east than did the United Peace Alliance. In this chapter the attitudes and actions of those who supported Cripps within the regional labour movement will be assessed as will the support (or lack of it) they received from their respective organisations. This is followed by a discussion of the nature of Cripps' support and an examination of the effects of the Petition Campaign in the region.

Cripps' Friends in the North

The first person to sign the Cripps Petition, in the north east and Britain as a whole, was C.P. Trevelyan.⁴ He chaired the Newcastle Petition Campaign meeting of 5 February and subsequently became one of Cripps' most vocal advocates.⁵ Trevelyan was astounded at the 'gigantic stupidity' of the NEC, which he attributed to 'personal hatred' of Cripps.⁶ In late February he spoke with Cripps at Manchester.⁷ Warned by the NEC, Trevelyan was still present on Petition meeting platforms in London and Cambridge in mid-March, stating that his

¹ *Tribune*, 20/1/39, supplement

This supplement carries a copy of the full Cripps Memorandum.

² *Ibid.*, 10/2/39, p1

³ *Newcastle Journal*, 6/2/39, p7

Though obviously not supporting the campaign from a left wing perspective, perhaps the newspaper had as much reason to exaggerate the success of the meeting as this would suggest that the splits within the labour movement over the popular front were considerable.

⁴ The first seven names on the petition were published in *Tribune* (10/2/39, p1).

⁵ Notes for speech at Newcastle, 5/2/39 (NRL, CPT184); *Tribune*, 3/2/39, p2 and 10/2/39, p1

⁶ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 6/2/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

⁷ Notes for speech at Manchester, 26/2/39 (NRL, CPT184)

views were unchanged. On receiving the NEC's warning letter, Trevelyan ignored it, commenting; 'How they hope to win the next election with sixty Labour Parties in rebellion, I don't know'.⁸ On 12 March he spoke at the Empress Stadium, London. Although Trevelyan held no brief for co-operation of the left parties, he thought that it must be achievable as 'All the local co-operation to help the Spaniards has proved it to be possible'.⁹ Though Labour was socialist, Trevelyan believed that it was possible to come to an understanding with Liberals over policies on industry, banks and coal mines.

Yet Trevelyan was not supported by his DLP. At a Wansbeck DLP meeting on March 18, Trevelyan's local Labour Party, Cambo, submitted a resolution condemning the NEC's expulsion of Cripps as a 'tyrannous outrage', especially as Cripps was merely 'advocating a strategy which at least to a very large section of the party members seems to be the wisest [...]'.¹⁰ In his speech proposing the resolution Trevelyan said that he would have moved it even if he did not agree with the popular front policy and that 'You have a right to disagree with your leaders when they make blazing fools of themselves'.¹¹ Opposing, Pat Carr condemned Cripps' claims that Labour would not win alone and claimed his defeatism was a 'treacherous act'.¹² The resolution was fairly heavily defeated 37 votes to 111 against.¹³ Trevelyan was not too downhearted, telling his wife: 'It was much as I expected'.¹⁴ The problem was that he 'couldn't moreover keep the issue to the expulsion of Cripps. The debate would go on to the merits of the Popular Front'.¹⁵ He also took solace in the fact that he was elected as delegate to the Labour conference because the party 'are very much attached to me and they generally approve my attitude'.¹⁶ Moreover, a Newburn LLP resolution at the same meeting suggested Trevelyan's LLP was not alone in its support for the popular front. The resolution, realising the 'imminent threat of fascism' in Britain, called for an immediate national conference to determine 'a common programme to serve all peace loving and democratic movements'.¹⁷

⁸ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 3/3/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

⁹ Notes for speech at Empress Stadium, 12/3/39 (NRL, CPT184).

Trevelyan was very impressed with the meeting, at which he thought 10,000 were present.

C.P. Trevelyan letters to wife, 11, 12 and 13/3/39 (NRL, CPTEX133) and *North Mail*, 6/3/39, p7

¹⁰ *Sunday Sun*, 19/3/39, p7

¹¹ *Ibid.*,

¹² *Ibid.*,

¹³ As chairperson of Newburn LLP, it was a little odd that Pat Carr opposed the Cambo LLP resolution given that his own LLP proposed a similar resolution. Wansbeck DLP executive, meeting a few days before, had recommended opposing this but supporting the other resolutions.

Wansbeck DLP Minutes 11/3/39 and 18/3/39 (NRON, 527/A/3); Wansbeck DLP AGM 1939 Agenda (NRL, CPT184) and *North Mail*, 20/3/39, p9

¹⁴ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 20/3/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,

¹⁷ The resolution came from Throckley ward.

However, this resolution was equally unsuccessful as an amendment urging the NEC to popularise Labour's *Immediate Programme* was carried by a large majority.¹⁸

A few days after this meeting it was announced that Trevelyan was one of five Labour Party members, along with Bevan, Strauss, Robert Bruce and Edgar Young, being sent a final ultimatum to withdraw their support for the campaign. A week previously seven rebels had received a first warning. Trevelyan was the only person not to reply.¹⁹ He did, however, reply to this second ultimatum and refused to withdraw his support for Cripps. Two days later he was at a Petition Campaign meeting at Bishop Auckland with Cripps. He appealed to Labour to adjust its policy which 'might have been very well in times when the world was not crumbling, to one which would be sufficient when the world was going down into the abyss'.²⁰ A few days later Trevelyan was expelled, along with Bevan, Strauss and a few others.²¹ Trevelyan's expulsion was a 'minor matter' to him compared to the need for unity and the expulsion had not changed his mind.²² Although he remained fairly uncommunicative on the subject in public, privately he told his wife: 'The situation is tragic for what it implies of narrowness, bigotry and sheer stupidity. [...] How can an executive directly occupied in suppressing discussion lead a democracy?'²³ The expulsion meant that Trevelyan could no longer represent Wansbeck DLP at the Labour conference. In early May a Wansbeck DLP executive meeting, recognising that Trevelyan had no right of appeal, selected William Maclean (Wansbeck PPC). Wansbeck DLP remained opposed to the popular front. Maclean, reporting on the Labour conference, said that the best speech was by the rank-and-file delegate J. Brown against Cripps.²⁴

Will Lawther's was the second name on the petition and Sam Watson's was the fifth. Both were DMA agents billed to be present before the Cripps campaign was announced and

Newburn and District LLP Minutes, 28/1/39 (NRON, 527/B/3)

Newburn LLP seemed to be at best very reluctant to show loyalty to the NEC. In a meeting at the beginning of March, the party received a letter from Middleton urging them to buy the NEC pamphlet *Unity. True or Sham*. The meeting resolved that no action be taken.

Newburn and District LLP Minutes, 1/3/39 (NRON, 527/B/3)

¹⁸ There seem to be two sets of figures in the minutes for this vote: 47-13 or 60-19 in favour.

Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 18/3/39 (NRON, 527/A/3)

¹⁹ G.R. Shepherd letter to Trevelyan, 23/3/39 (NRL, CPT154); *North Mail*, 23/3/39, p5 and *Shields Gazette*, 23/3/39, p10

²⁰ *Sunday Sun*, 26/3/39 p13

See also C.P. Trevelyan letters to wife, 21 and 24/3/39 (NRL, CPTEX133), *Tribune*, 6/4/39, p13; *North Mail*, 24/3/39, p4 and 27/3/39, p7

²¹ *North Mail*, 1/4/39, p7

²² *Sunday Sun*, 9/4/39, p2

²³ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 24/3/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

²⁴ Wansbeck DLP Minutes, 6/5/39 and 8/7/39 (NRON, 527/A/3) and *North Mail*, 6/5/39, p6

neither backed out on 5 February.²⁵ At a Durham County Federation of Labour Parties (DCFLP) meeting in mid-February Arthur Greenwood put the NEC's case against 'unity'. Lawther attacked Greenwood, quoting him as saying in 1936 that the popular front in France 'remains a pattern for the next Labour government'.²⁶ Lawther then challenged the NEC's contention that Labour would win a clear majority in the next general election: 'If there was so much faith in a Labour victory', he asked, 'why was there such a demand for safe seats in County Durham by candidates from other parts of the country?'²⁷ Sam Watson, speaking as an individual, supported Lawther. At a meeting commemorating the north east contingent of the International Brigade a week before the February 5 meeting, Lawther had intimated his support for the popular front. Stating that the labour movement needed to get rid of the government, he declared 'that the miners have and will support every move which will help to reach that goal. All who help, *whatever their party or creed*, will have the support of the miners' [my emphasis].²⁸ Watson presided at a popular front meeting in Newcastle in mid-April 1939.²⁹

Yet, unlike the united front in 1936 and 1937 (but as with the United Peace Alliance in 1938), the popular front did not secure official DMA support. The other DMA officials either remained silent on the issue or supported the NEC. This was the case for J.E. Swan, DMA general secretary and an NEC member. He opposed the popular front as it was contrary to the party's constitution and principles and conference decisions.³⁰ The vocal support of Lawther and Watson aroused some controversy in the DMA when extensive coverage was given to the debate in the DMA *Monthly Journal*. In February 1939, the whole of the NEC case was reproduced. The following month, it was the turn of the Cripps memorandum.³¹ In the April 1939 DMA council meeting a resolution from Murton lodge called for Lawther and Watson to 'give an explanation of recent political activities'.³² Presumably this was an attempt to reprimand them for supporting Cripps. In the event, the resolution was defeated 208-600 votes

²⁵ *Tribune*, 20/1/39, p3; 3/2/39, p2 and 10/2/39, p1

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17/2/39, p12

²⁷ *Ibid.*,

²⁸ Report that possibly appeared in the *Wearsider*, quoted in F. Graham, *The Battle of Jarama* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1987) p75

²⁹ The Progressive MP for Bridgwater, Vernon Bartlett, was due to speak but could not attend. The first meeting at the Connaught Hall was sold out, so an overflow meeting was planned.

Sunday Sun, 16/4/39, p11; *North Mail*, 17/4/39, p6 and 18/4/39, p1

³⁰ *North Mail*, 9/2/39, p7

³¹ *DMA Monthly Journal*, No.12, 3/39 (GPL, L622.33)

³² DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 1/4/39 (DMOR)

In the beginning of March Murton appealed to the DMA executive regarding the resolution, but it is uncertain on what grounds.

Murton Lodge Minutes, 16/2/39 and 2/3/39 (D/DMA/310)

against. It was reported that many present 'expressed the opinion that delegates had no right to interfere with the liberty of agents'.³³

Other lodges sent in resolutions that intimated support for both sides but, for undisclosed reasons, these were not permitted to appear. Ravensworth lodge's resolution in regard to a slip vote of lodges on Cripps' expulsion presumably indicated support of Cripps. On the other side were West Thornley's resolution supporting the NEC and proposing the empowerment of the DMA executive to call meetings throughout the county on the issue, and Trimdon Grange's resolution calling for DMA representatives at Labour conference to give the NEC full support.³⁴ Other lodges passed resolutions outside of the April DMA council meeting both for and against Cripps. Houghton-le-Spring lodge supported Cripps' expulsion whilst Spen and Chopwell lodges protested against it. It is possible that the Hetton resolution regarding a special council meeting to discuss Cripps' expulsion indicated support for him (especially as Hetton lodge had supported the Hunger March in 1936) but this is not certain.³⁵ In the event, the potential conflict in the DMA did not materialise as both Lawther and Watson backed down. Lawther (along with C.L. Poole MP) provided a satisfactory reply to the NEC letter sent to seven important Labour members (including Bevan and Trevelyan) without waiting for the NEC's ultimatum.³⁶ Cooke claimed that of those who withdrew their support from Cripps in February 'the most significant' was Lawther.³⁷ (Watson seems not to have been named in the letter).

There was still a possibility that Labour would expel Lawther as the NEC appeared, in early April, to be about to crack down on Labour Party members involved with LBC groups.³⁸ This coincided with the party's launch of the Labour Book Service. The announcement was accompanied by a letter from national Labour agent G.R. Shepherd to all divisional, borough and local Labour Parties threatening those who bought LBC books with expulsion.³⁹ Lawther

³³ *North Mail*, 3/4/39, p7

³⁴ DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 1/4/39 (DMOR)

³⁵ DMA EC Minutes, 13/2/39 and 20/2/39 (DMOR) and *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 10/3/39, p1

It is very difficult to determine the attitudes of Brancepeth No.2 and Eden lodges. Presumably Eden lodge was anti-Cripps, or at least indifferent. Whilst it received circulars for the conferences at Gateshead and Stanley (on March 11 and April 2 respectively) they were left on the table. After the delegates reported on the April DMA council meeting, Brancepeth No.2 Lodge resolved that 'we support the council decisions excepting resolution concerning the political activities of Mr W. Lawther and Mr S. Watson'. Whether this implied support or opposition to the popular front is unclear.

Eden Lodge Minutes, 9/3/39 (D/DMA/334/12) and Brancepeth No.2 Lodge Minutes, 20/4/39 (D/DMA/326/9)

³⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 23/3/39, p10 and *North Mail*, 23/3/39, p5

³⁷ C. Cooke, *The Life of Richard Stafford Cripps* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1957) p237

³⁸ J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982) p98 and S. Samuels, 'The Left Book Club', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.1, No.2 (1966) p77

³⁹ N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p216

had recently spoken at a LBC meeting. Watson, too, had been threatened with 'disaffiliation' for his involvement with the LBC. Yet Watson doubted that the NEC would continue with the purge when they realised the numbers of Labour members in LBC groups and felt that DLPs would object when they discovered how far the purge was intended to go.⁴⁰ Watson was astounded at the threat to LBC members, commenting; 'soon anybody with a left hand won't be allowed in the party'.⁴¹ Still, Watson disappeared out of view regarding Cripps' Petition Campaign so presumably he too relented.⁴² Thus, while it should be pointed out that both Cripps and Bevan were the guest speakers at the DMA gala in July 1939 (receiving the largest and second largest number of votes from the lodges respectively), Eatwell was mistaken in interpreting this as official DMA support for the popular front. It could, of course, indicate rank-and-file support, but the small number of DMA lodges that openly advocated Cripps' plan suggests otherwise.⁴³ As with Cripps' election as DMA gala speaker in 1937, this did not necessarily indicate support for his political stance.

There was considerable division in Newcastle City Labour Party as two Newcastle Labour PPCs, Lyall Wilkes (Newcastle Central) and Arthur Blenkinsop (Newcastle East), were the third and fourth signatories of the Cripps Petition respectively.⁴⁴ Blenkinsop was an early supporter. In a letter to *Tribune* he called the memorandum a 'most valuable basis for discussion' and pointed out, like Trevelyan, that those who had been active with both political and non-political organisations in the past few months on the Spanish foodship and other campaigns 'understand how effective such co-operation can be. We can also understand how much more effective it would have been had this co-ordinated effort been led by the Labour

LBC groups in some localities had formed the basis of the petition committees, but there is no evidence of this occurring in the north east. Gollancz circularised all LBC branches opposing activity in the campaign as he did not wish to alienate Labour further.

R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975) p343

C.P. Trevelyan attacked the Labour Book Service in a letter to *Left News* in April 1939.

J. Lewis, *The Left Book Club. An Historical Record* (Gollancz, 1970) p94

⁴⁰ Local Labour figures were still prepared to speak at LBC meetings in the region after this threat. In May, Watson chaired a LBC conference in Newcastle. Watson and Bowman (NMA) agreed to address LBC groups on *These Poor Hands* in June 1939 and in July Chuter Ede and Ellen Wilkinson spoke with Gollancz at a South Shields LBC meeting.

Tribune, 30/6/39, p8; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 6/39, p8 and *North Mail*, 17/7/39, p7

⁴¹ *Sunday Sun*, 9/4/39, p9

See also B. Reid, 'The Left Book Club in the Thirties', in J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies & C. Snee, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1979) pp197-8

⁴² Or perhaps Watson was merely luckier than the other local figure mentioned in this article, John Bell, who was expelled (see below). As a DMA official Watson may have been in a better position to resist expulsion.

⁴³ *North Mail*, 24/7/39, p5 and R. Eatwell, op cit., p326

⁴⁴ The sixth and seventh names on Cripps' petition, which were also the last two known names, were those of Hyman Lee and Harry Brook. Lee was an important figure in the north east CP so his name was not surprising. Brook was a member of Newcastle East DLP (Blenkinsop's party) and the Shop Assistants' Union. Nothing else is known about him.

Party'.⁴⁵ His support was not, however, unequivocal. He urged all to examine the NEC response to the memorandum especially where 'fundamental differences' lay between them 'for opposition unity in this country will only be effective if its dangers as well as its great possibilities are understood by our members'.⁴⁶

At the end of January 1939 both Wilkes and Blenkinsop put their names, together with several MPs, to a letter protesting at Cripps' expulsion. They saw the NEC decision as;

'irresponsible and unrepresentative [...] irresponsible having regard to the international situation and particularly to the tragic crisis of the Spanish war. Unrepresentative because the executive has taken no steps to ascertain the views of the membership of the party. We regard it as in keeping with the failure of the executive to mobilise effectively the opposition to the National Government which exists in the country among members of all parties and among those who belong to no party'.⁴⁷

Blenkinsop hedged his bets slightly and defended his attendance at the *Tribune* meeting on 5 February by saying that while he supported Cripps' memorandum, his presence at the meeting should 'not be taken to mean I support him in the campaign which he is to open tonight. I cannot make any decisions on that until I have heard more about Sir Stafford's plans'.⁴⁸ Both Blenkinsop and Wilkes spoke at the meeting. Wilkes was originally scheduled to preside, but gave way to Trevelyan, presumably on grounds of seniority.

Two weeks later Newcastle City Labour Party held a meeting on Cripps attended by representatives of the four Newcastle DLPs and local trade unions. A party statement attacked Cripps on three points: that he had conducted campaigns against party decisions; that he had 'acted in a way only possible to a rich man' and finally that he had 'deliberately flouted' conference decisions.⁴⁹ A large majority endorsed Cripps' expulsion. Blenkinsop attended and apparently agreed to abide by the Party's resolution. Wilkes, though not present, was required to endorse the resolution as well. If he did not, the City Labour Party would order Newcastle Central DLP to find another candidate. The Newcastle East DLP annual meeting endorsed Cripps' expulsion with only four delegates voting against. The chairperson said that the party expected Blenkinsop to carry out its wishes as expressed in the resolution. However, although

⁴⁵ The Tyneside foodship is discussed in chapter eight.

Tribune, 27/1/39, p6

Blenkinsop was likely to have been under C.P. Trevelyan's influence as 'Blenk' visited Trevelyan at Wallington.

C.P. Trevelyan letters to wife, 16/4/39 and 4/6/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

⁴⁶ Ibid.,

⁴⁷ *North Mail*, 30/1/39, p7

⁴⁸ *Sunday Sun*, 5/2/39, p11

⁴⁹ *North Mail*, 15/2/39, p5

present at the meeting, Blenkinsop did not speak and later denied he had withdrawn his support for Cripps at the City Labour Party meeting.⁵⁰ Wilkes, too, refused to comply. He told a special meeting of Newcastle Central DLP that he was whole-heartedly behind Cripps and that he would continue to support him so long as there had been no Labour Party conference decision.⁵¹ Far from taking the first steps in replacing him, the meeting passed a vote of confidence in their candidate (although this was not unanimous: the vote was 8-2 in favour with some abstentions). Though the party obviously thought Wilkes was a good candidate, his endorsement was not merely personal: Newcastle Central DLP sent two messages of support for Cripps in February. In early April Wilkes was one of fourteen Labour PPCs who wrote to the NEC protesting against the attempt to stifle discussion in the Labour Party and expressing their determination to continue supporting Cripps' campaign. Later that month, Wilkes put his name to another letter, signed by seventeen PPCs, protesting at Labour's attitude to Cripps and reaffirming their intention to keep supporting the popular front.⁵²

Other Cripps supporters fared less well than Blenkinsop and Wilkes. In late January 1939, Bishop Auckland LLP supported the NEC and a resolution sent to the MP, Dalton, endorsed his action regarding Cripps' expulsion. The following month M. Walton (who had been chairperson of the LLP in 1938) protested against the resolution. Controversy continued into March when the NCL's statement *Unity True or Sham* was read. There are, unfortunately, no details of the ensuing debate, described only as an 'interesting discussion'.⁵³ By the end of March it was clear that Walton was not alone in supporting Cripps. At the Bishop Auckland DLP AGM, county councillor John Bell proposed a resolution supporting the Cripps Petition submitted by Randolph lodge, Evenwood. It was heavily defeated (by 53 votes to 7) and a resolution supporting Dalton's position passed. The next day, Bell presided at the Bishop Auckland popular front meeting with Cripps. Threatened with expulsion in early April, Bell, a long distinguished figure in Durham Labour circles, refused to disassociate himself from the campaign (although he did state his wish to remain in the party).⁵⁴ A delegate's report on a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 17/2/39, p1

⁵¹ The fact that there was no Labour conference in 1938 created as many problems for the Labour leadership as it solved. If the north east was indicative of majority feeling within the party, then a Labour conference in 1938 would have defeated the popular front and thus avoided much of the trouble that the issue brought in 1939.

⁵² *Tribune*, 10/2/39, p12; 24/2/39, p12; 6/4/39, p8; *North Mail*, 27/2/39, p5; 6/4/39, p7 and *Daily Worker* (final edition), 29/4/39, p4

⁵³ Bishop Auckland Minutes LLP, 26/1/39 and 23/3/39 (DRO, D/BAL/1/2)

Whilst Dalton had, as we have seen, attempted to build cross party anti-government co-operation in Parliament, he was opposed to Cripps' plans. For details of his attitude see B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) pp254-261

⁵⁴ *Sunday Sun*, 26/3/39, p13; 9/4/39, p9 and newspaper article, 27/3/39 (BLPES, Dalton Papers, Part III/7)

DLP meeting to the LLP in late April noted that both Bell and Walton had been expelled for supporting Cripps.⁵⁵

Two of the most important figures in Blaydon Labour Party were also prominently involved in the Petition Campaign. At the DCFLP meeting, Henry Bolton joined Will Lawther by attacking the NEC for 'rejecting working class unity while at the same time permitting Mr Herbert Morrison and others to collaborate with the National Government'.⁵⁶ The secretary of Blaydon Labour Party, Steve Lawther, spoke at a conference in Gateshead Town Hall to discuss the 'unity campaign' in mid-March.⁵⁷ The conference formed a regional committee to distribute petitions and organise house-to-house canvassing.⁵⁸ Lawther's wife, Emmie, spoke against a resolution condemning the 'activities of the Popular Front' and pledging 'solid support' to Labour at a Durham County Labour Women's Sections emergency conference.⁵⁹ Only six of the 221 delegates voted with Lawther against the resolution. Whilst these important individuals in Blaydon Labour Party supported Cripps' campaign, it is not clear if Blaydon DLP as a whole did.⁶⁰ There is no evidence at all of the attitude of the Labour MP for the constituency William Whitely. Perhaps he was just keeping a low profile.

There was another important name missing in this list of north east Cripps supporters, that of Ellen Wilkinson. Though she did not sign the Cripps Petition, Wilkinson had been one of the most high profile of Cripps' early supporters. Replying to Conservative allegations of splits in the Labour Party in late January 1939, Wilkinson claimed that nothing more was occurring than a 'discussion regarding electoral strategy'.⁶¹ She thought it 'necessary to pull together all anti-Chamberlain elements' and that 'our case on strategy is so strong that there would be no difficulty in converting the rank-and-file to our views'.⁶² It was vital, 'particularly in agricultural constituencies [to prevent] suicidal three-cornered fights which would present

⁵⁵ This was despite the fact that the LLP had, in mid-April, decided that all DLP delegates should vote to take no action on Cripps or the popular front until Labour conference. Walton was 'heartily' thanked by the meeting for his 'splendid work' for the party.

Bishop Auckland Minutes LLP, 13/4/39 and 27/4/39 (DRO, D/BAL/1/2)

⁵⁶ It is unclear if Bolton was referring to Labour's rejection of the united front or the popular front. If it was the latter, using the term 'working class unity' to describe the popular front was strange.

Tribune, 17/2/39, p12

⁵⁷ *Sunday Sun*, 12/3/39, p11

⁵⁸ This committee presumably came to form the North East District Petition Campaign committee with an area office in Newcastle. There were twelve regional committees in total.

Tribune, 3/3/39, p19 and R. Eatwell, op cit., p336

⁵⁹ The 221 delegates represented 113 Durham County Labour Women's Sections with a total membership of 3,754.

North Mail, 6/3/39, p7

⁶⁰ It is possible, as Blaydon DLP supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938. Blaydon Labour Party certainly supported Cripps, as it sent two messages of support to *Tribune*.

Tribune, 10/2/39, p12 and 24/2/39, p12

⁶¹ *Shields Gazette*, 23/1/39, p3

the seats to the government on a minority vote'.⁶³ At this stage, Wilkinson was the only north east supporter of Cripps on the NEC. She voted, along with Cripps and D.N. Pritt, for the memorandum on the NEC. On 25 January she was the only person to vote against Cripps' expulsion (Harold Laski and Pritt were absent). Despite her support for Cripps, she appealed, along with the rest of the NEC, for him to withdraw his memorandum. Wilkinson regretted the NEC decision to expel Cripps: 'I voted against it, but of course I remain loyal to the Socialist Party [sic.]'.⁶⁴ She appreciated 'to the full' the 'anxiety' of the NEC to maintain Labour's independence and socialist programme but she did 'not think it would have been in any way compromised' if Cripps' suggestion had been accepted.⁶⁵ A few days later Wilkinson defended Cripps in a private meeting of the PLP. She argued not for what Cripps had said, but rather against the way he had been treated by the NEC.⁶⁶ This was consistent with her earlier loyalty to Labour and the NEC (see chapters four and five).

Jarrow DLP was content with their MP's position and announced that it would take no action against Wilkinson, a special meeting on the subject being deemed unnecessary. Jarrow LP&TC was prepared to go further. Almost as soon as the controversy had broken, the secretary of West ward of Jarrow LP&TC sent his best wishes to Cripps. A Jarrow LP&TC special meeting called to consider Cripps' expulsion passed a resolution urging his re-admission (63 votes to 4 in favour).⁶⁷ Despite backing for Cripps from an important section of Jarrow DLP, Wilkinson pulled out of the 5 February *Tribune* meeting explaining that whilst she was 'in general sympathy with the principles outlined in the memorandum', she considered Cripps' national campaign 'would not be in the interests of unity or of the strength' of the Labour Party.⁶⁸ As an NEC member Wilkinson felt that she could not 'possibly be represented on his platform as a sponsor of the campaign'.⁶⁹ Regardless of Wilkinson's attitude, messages

⁶² Ibid.,

⁶³ Ibid.,

The Conservative PPC Francis Williams and Jarrow Conservatives were pleased about Wilkinson's links with Cripps, which they used in an attempt to discredit her.

Shields Gazette, 19/1/39, p2; 23/2/39, p6; *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p12 and *North Mail*, 23/1/39, p5

⁶⁴ *North Mail*, 26/1/39, p7

⁶⁵ Ibid.,

⁶⁶ She also voted for Pritt's resolution on the NEC to take no further action against Cripps.

NEC Minutes, 22/3/39; *Shields Gazette*, 1/2/39, p5 and R. Eatwell, op cit., p351

⁶⁷ *Tribune*, 20/1/39, p12; *North Mail*, 27/1/39, p5; 7/2/39, p7 and *Shields Gazette*, 3/2/39, p14

⁶⁸ *Shields Gazette*, 4/2/39, p8; *Times*, 4/2/39, p7 and *Sunday Sun*, 5/2/39, p11

However, these considerations did not stop her from speaking at a large popular front demonstration in London at the end of February protesting against the recognition of Franco. Wilfred Roberts (Liberal MP, Cumberland North) was present in an unofficial capacity collecting signatures for Cripps' Petition.

North Mail, 27/2/39, p1

⁶⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 4/2/39, p8

At the meeting, Cripps paid tribute to Wilkinson's 'sincerity' and said that, in staying away, 'she had acted in the way she considered best in the interests of the working classes'.

of support for Cripps were received by *Tribune* throughout February from Jarrow LP&TC and Primrose and Monkton ward of Jarrow Labour Party.⁷⁰ However, Jarrow DLP did not agree with Jarrow LP&TC. A resolution urging support of the NEC over its attitude to the popular front was approved at the Jarrow DLP AGM.⁷¹ Despite not publicly supporting the Petition Campaign, Wilkinson still supported the proposals. At the NUDAW annual conference she spoke in the debate on a motion calling for Cripps' reinstatement: 'The worst of this expulsion policy is we don't know where it stops [...] although I agree with the general principles behind Sir Stafford Cripps' memorandum, even if I disagreed with every word of it, I would still fight to the death for his right to say it'.⁷² She accused Labour of 'increasing encroachments on the rights of minorities'.⁷³

In the light of this evidence, Vernon's claim that Wilkinson's 'conception of effective political strategy at home was as confused - even as illogical - as that of the Labour Party as a whole' does not appear to be corroborated.⁷⁴ Wilkinson seemed convinced that the popular front strategy was the right one, but was reluctant to risk upsetting the leadership which could lead to expulsion. Thus Vernon was correct to highlight Wilkinson's loyalty to the party as an important factor in explaining her behaviour and perhaps this loyalty was due as much to her affections for Herbert Morrison, as Vernon claimed, as it was to her personal political ambitions.⁷⁵ This must remain a matter for speculation. Roger Eatwell argued that the fact that Cripps did not consult most popular fronters, including Wilkinson, before beginning the campaign did not influence her stance greatly. Wilkinson 'At a greater distance from his [Cripps'] infectious commitment [...] saw the problems which the petition faced'.⁷⁶ Eatwell was right to note that 'in Wilkinson's case the sense of loyalty to conference decisions was far stronger than in Cripps'.⁷⁷

Cripps received support from some other sections of the north east labour movement. South Shields LP&TC received a copy of a letter from their MP, Chuter Ede, to the national Labour Party secretary, Middleton, expressing his amazement at the expulsion. The party then passed overwhelmingly (27 votes to 2) a resolution protesting at the 'hasty' expulsion, condemning the 'attempt to stifle discussion within the party' and demanding a hearing for

Newcastle Journal, 6/2/39, p7

⁷⁰ *Tribune*, 10/2/39, p12 and 24/2/39, p12

⁷¹ *North Mail*, 20/3/39, p5 and *Shields Gazette*, 20/3/39, p2

⁷² The motion was carried by a small majority (63,000 to 51,000 against with 40,000 abstentions).

North Mail, 11/4/39, p7

⁷³ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁴ B.D. Vernon, *Ellen Wilkinson, 1891-1947* (Croom Helm, 1982) p172

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p174

⁷⁶ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, p337

Cripps at conference.⁷⁸ In April 1939 South Shields LP&TC passed a resolution 'inviting' the NEC to bring all the prominent expelled Cripps supporters back into the party.⁷⁹ Again, though, it seems that South Shields DLP did not openly support Cripps. The expulsion placed Tynemouth Labour Party in a quandary as it had booked him to speak on February 5 (before he was expelled) and had sold hundreds of tickets for the meeting. After discussion, the party decided that the meeting should still take place and by the first week of February it had passed a resolution against Cripps' expulsion.⁸⁰ In early April, Morpeth Labour Party 'strongly condemned' the NEC for expelling Cripps.⁸¹

On the exclusively industrial side of the labour movement, two trades councils, Blyth and Newcastle, sent messages supporting Cripps.⁸² In addition, some individual trade union branches backed Cripps. In February 1939, Stanley NUGMW branch, with a membership of 180, protested against Cripps' expulsion and urged his re-instatement.⁸³ Newcastle No.13 AEU branch sent a resolution to the AEU executive calling for Cripps' reinstatement. Failing this, the branch of 500 announced its intention to suspend payment of affiliation fees. Significantly, this was the only resolution of this type that the AEU executive received at this time.⁸⁴ The chairperson of Heaton ASLEF branch supported Cripps as 'only this way can civilisation be saved'.⁸⁵ Newcastle ASLEF and Gateshead No.1 NUR branches both appeared on a list of Cripps supporters.⁸⁶ The following month, Woodhorn branch of the Northumberland Colliery Mechanics Association (NCMA) sent a copy of a protest against Cripps' expulsion which it had submitted to the NEC to its own executive with a request that the executive send a similar one.⁸⁷ Lack of detailed evidence means that it has not been possible to identify those represented at a rally in West Stanley Co-op Hall in early April that supported the Cripps memorandum.⁸⁸

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁸ South Shields LP&TC Minutes, 31/1/39 (SSPL, LPM6)

A message of support was also sent to *Tribune*.

Tribune, 10/2/39, p12

⁷⁹ South Shields LP&TC Minutes, 11/4/39 (SSPL, LPM6) and *Shields Gazette*, 12/4/39, p10

⁸⁰ *Shields Gazette*, 23/1/39, p4; *North Mail*, 30/1/39, p7; 7/2/39, p7 and *Tribune*, 24/2/39, p12

⁸¹ *North Mail*, 1/4/39, p5

⁸² *Tribune*, 10/2/39, p12 and 24/2/39, p12

⁸³ *Blaydon Courier*, 17/2/39, p2

⁸⁴ AEU EC Minutes, 22/2/39 (WMRC, 259/1/2/74)

⁸⁵ *Tribune*, 10/2/39, p12

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 24/2/39, p12

Newcastle branch of ASLEF defended Cripps from the NEC in 1936.

J.G. Baty letter to Middleton, 14/12/36 (MLHA, LP/SOCIALIST LEAGUE/35/26)

⁸⁷ NCMA EC Minutes, 15/3/39 (NROM, 5021/A4/2)

⁸⁸ George Rumney (West Stanley CP secretary) letter to TUC, 4/4/39 (WMRC, 292/743/2)

The Quantity and Quality of Cripps' North East Support

There was not a large amount of activity in support of Cripps' campaign in the region.⁸⁹ Moreover, as with both the Unity and the United Peace Alliance campaigns, many of those who supported Cripps were entirely predictable.⁹⁰ In fact, all the major Labour Party names connected with Cripps' campaign in the north east were from the Labour left. Trevelyan and Blenkinsop supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938. John Bell was a friend of Trevelyan from at least 1916 when his family stayed with the Trevelyans. In 1936 Bell wrote to Trevelyan praising him for his speech attacking the NEC on its attitude to Spain. Bell shared Trevelyan's cataclysmic view of the international scene: in January 1937 he thought that events in that year could determine history for the next 100 years.⁹¹ Blaydon Labour Party (Steve Lawther and Bolton's party) supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938, as did Jarrow LP&TC and South Shields LP&TC.⁹² Dunston was part of Blaydon DLP, whilst Hebburn was part of Jarrow constituency, so their presence was not surprising. Stanley Labour Party was Bart Kelly's party. He had also supported the United Peace Alliance. The four DMA lodges supporting Cripps had all been involved in either the Hunger March, supporting Communist affiliation to Labour or the Unity Campaign. Newcastle TC was involved in all left wing activity in this period.

Three of the Cripps Petition signatories are worthy of lengthier comment. Will Lawther and Sam Watson did not support the United Peace Alliance in 1938. It is uncertain why this was the case as they were both left wing, vocal anti-fascists before 1939 and actively supported the united front. The evidence does not reveal when or precisely why they came to support the popular front. Perhaps Watson came to it through the Durham LBC circle of which he was a member.⁹³ Regardless of why they had not openly supported the United Peace Alliance in

⁸⁹ A planned Petition Campaign meeting in Jarrow was abandoned due to the weather.

North Mail, 17/5/39, p5

The evidence of Eden Lodge Minutes suggests that the only two conferences were organised to support Cripps' memorandum in the region (at Gateshead and Stanley). In March the lodge received circulars regarding these two conferences but no others were mentioned.

Eden Lodge Minutes, 9/3/39 (D/DMA/334/12)

⁹⁰ Incorporating all the Labour Parties represented at the Gateshead 'Unity' conference in March 1939, labour movement organisations which left evidence of their endorsement of the Cripps Petition Campaign in the north east were: Blaydon and Winlaton (including women's section), Birtley, Blyth, Cambo, Cleadon, Dunston, Ellington, Hebburn, Jarrow, Morpeth, Newburn, Primrose and Monkton including women's section, Shinee Row, South Hylton, South Shields, Stanley, Tynemouth and Willington Quay local, ward and town Labour Parties and Newcastle Central DLP. On the industrial side were Blyth and Newcastle TCs, Ravensworth, Spen, Chopwell and Hetton lodges (DMA), Woodhorn branch, NCMA, Newcastle No.13 AEU, Heaton and Newcastle ASLEF branches, Gateshead No.1 NUR and Stanley branch, NUGMW.

Sunday Sun, 12/3/39, p11

⁹¹ John Bell letters to C.P. Trevelyan, 18/8/36, 8/10/36 (NRL, CPT150) and 14/1/37 (NRL, CPT152)

⁹² The absence of support from Blaydon TC was probably due to the dominant position of Colgan, a Catholic.

⁹³ Watson also chaired Durham SMAC which formed from the LBC circle.

1938, as they remained on the left throughout this period, support for Cripps would have been expected. Lyall Wilkes was an interesting addition to the north east Labour left. Oxford educated, Wilkes had only been Labour PPC for Newcastle Central since January 1938 and was, at 22, possibly the youngest PPC in England.⁹⁴ Active in the Labour left after 1945, presumably he did not openly support the United Peace Alliance in 1938 because he was still finding his feet in his new DLP and did not wish to potentially jeopardise his standing at such an early stage.⁹⁵ This is substantiated by an event in September 1938. Apparently, Wilkes was prevented from chairing a LBC rally in Newcastle with Gollancz and Pollitt due to the intervention of Transport House.⁹⁶ When Wilkes did pronounce for Cripps, he was the only Labour figure to receive the endorsement of his DLP.

Yet the Petition Campaign seemed to have had some significant individual successes in the support it garnered. In February 1937, a Lemington ward committee resolution critical of the NEC treatment of the Socialist League and against heresy hunting within the party, was narrowly defeated at a Newburn LLP meeting. Now Newburn LLP supported Cripps.⁹⁷ The support of Tynemouth Labour Party was important, as relations with Tynemouth CP had not been particularly good and the party had not previously supported the popular front. (That Tynemouth TC did not support Cripps was perhaps due to the chairperson, Ovington's, opposition to Communism). Morpeth DLP had, in 1936, narrowly voted against supporting CP affiliation to Labour and had supported the NEC's anti-popular front attitude in 1938. Thus support for the popular front from Morpeth Labour Party in 1939 was a significant development. Another important part of Morpeth DLP, Blyth, also provided a surprise as both the trades council and Labour Party supported Cripps. There was little indication of support for the popular front in Blyth labour movement before 1939. Of the two, Blyth TC seemed more amenable to the CP, with its pro-united front sounding resolution of June 1936 and then its questioning of the Black Circular in 1937. Relations between the CP and Labour in Blyth seem to have been worse, with Labour councillors expressing anti-Communist sentiments at the time of the Hunger March and problems between the CP, NUWM and Labour members on the Board of Guardians (see chapter one).

Durham Chronicle, 11/6/37, p8 and 30/7/37, p6

⁹⁴ *North Mail*, 10/5/37, p2; 15/3/38, p6; *Newcastle Journal*, 26/11/36, p8; *Durham Chronicle*, 18/1/38, p3 and S. Ball (ed.), *Parliament and Politics in the Age of Churchill and Attlee. The Headlam Diaries, 1935-1951* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999) p544

⁹⁵ Wilkes was later involved in 'Keep Left' (the Bevanite left wing group).

F. Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow* (Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, St. Albans, 1977) p164

⁹⁶ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 9/38, p2

⁹⁷ The resolution was defeated 11 votes to 7.

Newburn and District LLP Minutes, 10/2/37 (NRON, 527/B/3)

These successes can be ranked by dividing the north east Labour Parties that supported Cripps into three main groups. The first group is that of parties that were Labour left dominated and thus predictable popular front supporters. Stanley and Blaydon parties fell into this category. In both areas Labour was dominant and the left appeared to be in control. In Newcastle Central, Labour was weaker but in the thrall of Wilkes. It is probable that other parties that left no direct evidence of their activities immediately before the Cripps campaign were also left dominated. The second group is of parties from areas where Labour was weak, such as Morpeth and Tynemouth. These are two good examples of the kind of parties that perhaps would be expected to support the popular front, regardless of poor relations with Communists, as both operated in strongly Conservative areas.⁹⁸ However, their support of Cripps was less predictable, and therefore more of a success when it came, than that of the left-dominated parties. A third group of parties that neither of the previous two conditions applied to represented the most significant gains for Cripps. The main example of this group was Blyth Labour Party where Labour was dominant in local politics and not notably left wing before 1939. Yet, as Blyth is the only example that can be cited with certainty, this is a reflection on the lack of success Cripps achieved in the region. Overall, Cripps secured support from the left plus a handful of other parties, some of which were more predictable popular front supporters than others. Several local parties do not appear in the sources at all and they cannot be analysed.⁹⁹ However, it could be argued that their very presence in the campaign, as low profile parties, represented something of a success for Cripps. At the same time, the fact they went unreported suggests that they were of little significance in the north east labour movement.

There is, however, a very important mitigating factor that qualifies even these few apparent successes. It is not always clear from the evidence that these organisations actually *supported the popular front*. A message of support for Cripps or condemnation of the NEC did not necessarily indicate agreement with Cripps' memorandum. More DLPs expressed their opposition to the NEC's *treatment* of Cripps than support for his plans. With many of the north east organisations discussed here, it is impossible to determine whether they supported Cripps' case for a popular front or were merely supporting Cripps' *right to argue his case* against an anti-democratic and oppressive NEC. Given the relative tolerance of the north east labour movement, it is very likely that many organisations mentioned here fell into this latter category.

⁹⁸ Though Morpeth constituency was Labour-held and also contained the labour movement stronghold of Blyth, Labour only won its first seat on Morpeth council in 1939.

Moreover, set against these successes were the organisations that would have been expected to support Cripps but which did not. The campaign's most important failures were Newcastle North and Newcastle East DLPs that had supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938 but which now opposed Cripps. The attitude to Cripps and the popular front of Gateshead LP&TC, which had supported the Unity Campaign in 1937 but not the popular front in 1938, is a mystery. Ferguson claimed that Gateshead DLP's choice of Konni Zilliacus as its PPC proved that the party 'was greatly concerned by international events and that they were in favour of the idea of a Popular Front'.¹⁰⁰ Evidence cited to support this is the *Gateshead Labour Herald's* attitude towards Soviet Russia. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 was not mentioned in the paper and, during the Second World War, the Soviet invasion of Finland 'to safeguard socialism' was supported. Moreover, Zilliacus' predecessor, Bart Kelly, supported the United Peace Alliance conference in May 1938, although no other obvious Gateshead Labour Party figures did. It is curious that there is no mention at all in the sources of the Gateshead LP&TC nor of the DLP supporting the Cripps campaign. In fact, very few of the left wingers in Gateshead Labour Party (such as Gunn, Kegie, and Pickering) appear to have been active on this issue. The only evidence of support for Cripps in the *Gateshead Labour Herald* was an article prompted by his expulsion. Cripps was depicted as 'an eloquent speaker and a first class debater' and the anonymous writer wondered 'Was this offence so serious that only expulsion could meet the case? Are members of the party to be expelled for the advocacy of views which conflict with official policy?'¹⁰¹ The defeat of the government would, it was argued, 'be no less than a turning point in world affairs, and the ultimate defeat of Fascism. Dare we neglect any methods by which this can be brought about?'¹⁰² Conceivably Allan Henderson, previously of the Socialist League, wrote this piece, as he had penned pro-popular front pieces in 1936 and 1938.¹⁰³ Henderson had identified himself in these previous works; perhaps fear that he would share Cripps' fate dictated the decision not to sign this latest one. This fear of reprisal may also have compelled many in Gateshead DLP not to speak out in Cripps' favour. Alternatively, perhaps the majority did not

⁹⁹ These were Birtley, Cleadon, Ellington, Shiney Row, South Hylton and Willington Quay.

¹⁰⁰ S. Ferguson, 'Labour Party Politics, 1939-45. A Case Study of Konni Zilliacus and the Gateshead Labour Party and Trades Council' (Gateshead Library, 1988) pp13, 47-9

¹⁰¹ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 2/39, p7

¹⁰² *Ibid.*,

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 8/36, p7 and 8/38, p7

Henderson was a typical middle class left winger in the mould of Cripps himself. A solicitors clerk and writer in 1933 of a Northern Drama League award-winning one act play, he had been an ILP member at least until 1935. Three years later the now Labour Party member, lawyer, actor and writer was helping on the *Gateshead Labour Herald*.

support Cripps' proposals. The evidence is inconclusive, but more evidence of support for the popular front than the fact Zilliacus was elected PPC is required.¹⁰⁴ Certainly, the Cripps campaign was seldom mentioned in the *Gateshead Labour Herald*. In contrast, the success of the Labour government in New Zealand received much coverage, suggesting that the party saw salvation in the form of a Labour government rather than popular front.

In general, there was very little support for Cripps and the popular front apart from that of the few key figures who have been discussed already. Some of the Cripps meetings did attract large crowds, but there were mitigating considerations. The 3,500 (with 1,000 turned away) at the launch meeting on 5 February was an impressive turnout.¹⁰⁵ In the immediate aftermath, Trevelyan could hardly contain his enthusiasm. It had been, he claimed, the biggest meeting in 15 years in the town: 'Quite possibly it [the Cripps Petition] may be a success to judge by its instantaneous reception at Newcastle. Fancy £91 being subscribed in 15 minutes for the fund for running it!'¹⁰⁶ Trevelyan was exaggerating. The first Unity Campaign meeting in Newcastle only two years before had mobilised 5,000 people and raised only £8 less than this first Petition Campaign meeting.¹⁰⁷ And, as argued in chapter four, the Unity Campaign that this large meeting initiated in the region had no palpable positive effects. Thus, Eatwell was right to criticise Cripps' over-estimation of the political impact of large public meetings.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the meeting had been planned before the Cripps controversy had erupted and it is likely that many present did not support the popular front. The same point about size of meetings not necessarily equating to support can be made about the Cripps meeting at Bishop Auckland. Whilst there was an attendance of 600 and it was the largest meeting the town had

ILP NAC Minutes, 28/6/35 (BLPES, COLLMISC702/10) and M. Callcott (ed.), *A Pilgrimage of Grace. The Diaries of Ruth Dodds, 1905-1974* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) p161

¹⁰⁴ In January 1939 the town was one of few in the region that did not have a popular front-supporting LBC circle. Perhaps this was indicative of the lack of support the project received in the town.

Left Book News, 1/39

¹⁰⁵ The *Newcastle Journal* put the figure at 3,000 plus.

Newcastle Journal, 6/2/39, p7

¹⁰⁶ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 6/2/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

¹⁰⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 22/3/37, p6 and *New Leader*, 26/3/37, p6

In fact, the way in which a large amount of the money was raised suggests that Cripps benefited from a handful of relatively wealthy benefactors rather than from the pennies of working class supporters. Trevelyan was the first to donate, and placed £10 on the chairperson's table. Members of the audience in the front rows and those on the platform then threw several £5 notes onto the table and this was followed by an 'avalanche of half crowns'. In fact, more than two thirds of the total donated (£64-9-6 of the £91) was raised in this way before the collecting tin was passed around the audience. Trevelyan's single donation amounted to more than the difference in money raised between this and the Unity Campaign meetings; even then the total collected was not massive. The IB memorial meeting, which occurred two weeks before, raised £142-13-6. Trevelyan was not noted as having attended the first Unity Campaign demonstration, so he may have been ignorant of the turnout and the amount raised. He was, however, at the IB meeting and must have known that it raised over £50 more.

Newcastle Journal, 16/1/39, p3 and 6/2/39, p7

¹⁰⁸ R. Eatwell, op cit., p358

seen for years, just over a sixth (110) signed the petition. Curiously, this was even less than the 115 who had volunteered to help collect signatures!¹⁰⁹ The North Shields meeting of 350 and the meeting of 600 in West Stanley were also impressive turnouts; yet in isolated places where very little went on politically, a public meeting with as well-known a figure as Cripps was always likely to attract large audiences, out of curiosity if nothing else.¹¹⁰

The lack of widespread north east support for Cripps is revealed by the mid-March Petition Campaign conference in Gateshead. Here only 160 people representing 50 political parties, trade union branches, miners' lodges and co-operative bodies were present. This was a very poor turnout, as altogether 1,400 organisations had been invited to attend (a response of less than 4%).¹¹¹ The support of perhaps a few more than 50 'progressive organisations' in the whole of the north east was hardly a ringing endorsement of the popular front in 1939. In fact, this conference compared unfavourably with the United Peace Alliance conference of May 1938. Then, it will be recalled, an estimated 100 different 'progressive' organisations were represented. As was argued, this figure was not large, but it was still double what Cripps' supporters could muster ten months later. Assuming that all those present at the Gateshead conference were listed in the report, the figure of 17 local Labour Parties identified as supporting Cripps seems fairly accurate. Again, this figure was not impressive, especially given that only one DLP in the region supported Cripps.¹¹²

Another point related to that of the possibility of many in the audience at the first meeting not supporting the popular front (and also suggesting an initial failure of the campaign) was the absence of many of the important figures originally billed to speak. In January, the meeting was advertised as a '*Tribune* Rally' with north east speakers including Ellen Wilkinson, Lyall Wilkes, C.P. Trevelyan, Will Lawther, David Adams MP, Jack Bowman (AEU), Sam Watson, William Maclean (Labour Party PPC, Wansbeck), Arthur Blenkinsop, R.E. Butchart (Shop Assistants' Union), the mayors of Gateshead and Jarrow and councillors Allen and Clydesdale. *Tribune* noted that 'Practically the whole of the local labour movement will thus be represented at this great meeting'.¹¹³ However, only Lawther, Wilkes and

¹⁰⁹ *Sunday Sun*, 26/3/39, p13 and *Tribune*, 6/4/39, p13

¹¹⁰ *Tribune*, 10/2/39, p1 and George Rumney (West Stanley CP secretary) letter to TUC, 4/4/39 (WMRC, 292/743/2)

¹¹¹ Here the figure of about three delegates per organisation fits with the figures given in the report. A 4% turnout was very poor, but it was still better than the pathetic response to the TJPC conference on Spain and China in October 1938 (see chapter five).

Sunday Sun, 12/3/39, p11

¹¹² Or possibly two DLPs if Blaydon is included. Unfortunately it is not possible to make a close comparison between the two conferences as the reports on the May 1938 United Peace Alliance conference were far less detailed.

¹¹³ *Tribune*, 3/2/39, p2

Blenkinsop definitely spoke (and Trevelyan presided). If the other figures, many of them important in the north east, had spoken, then it is safe to expect that they would have been mentioned in any report. Thus, along with Ellen Wilkinson, Adams, Bowman, Maclean and Butchart all seem to have pulled out.¹¹⁴ Much of the local labour movement was, in fact, not represented.

Had David Adams been present and supported Cripps this would have been a notable coup as he was a moderate figure and a Catholic. In January, Adams had said at an AEU meeting that 'The prime minister [...] was supporting General Franco as much as Germany and Italy and the policy dictated by the shadow cabinet in this country was such *that only united action by the workers would unite our democracy*' [my emphasis].¹¹⁵ This suggests that Adams may have supported the popular front, or perhaps the united front, but, as there is no other evidence of his support, it is likely that he pulled out because he opposed Cripps. Maclean's party, Wansbeck, was opposed to the popular front, so it is likely he withdrew too. This was despite the fact that in late January 1939, Maclean was fearful of the possibility of fascism in Britain if Labour did not win constituencies such as Wansbeck in the forthcoming general election.¹¹⁶

The most significant figure who appears to have withdrawn from the meeting was Jack Bowman. He was important because he had sent a message of support to the United Peace Alliance conference in 1938. His behaviour on the Cripps campaign indicates that far from becoming more favourable to the popular front with the tense international situation after Munich, he had in fact become less supportive. Bowman ostensibly personified the fact that the United Peace Alliance was better supported in the north east than was Cripps' campaign.¹¹⁷ However, another and more likely possibility is that Bowman's support for the United Peace Alliance conference in 1938 was an aberration based on a misunderstanding of what it was actually about. Certainly by March 1939 Bowman sounded a very long way from being a possible popular front supporter. He appeared on a platform with Eden at a National Service rally in Newcastle City Hall. Bertha Elliott, a writer, trades unionist and Labour Party member attended the rally with an 'open mind' as the TUC executive and the NEC were in favour of

¹¹⁴ The mayors of Gateshead and Jarrow and Allen and Clydesdale were not mentioned as attending the meeting. Given Jarrow LP&TC's support of Cripps it is feasible that the Jarrow mayor was present. The same can be said for the pro-Communist mayor of Gateshead. As with the other lesser figures Allen and Clydesdale, it is possible that they attended but did not warrant a mention in the newspaper reports.

¹¹⁵ *Blaydon Courier*, 20/1/39, p5

¹¹⁶ This was expressed in a message to the Newburn and District LLP annual conference. Maclean, it will be recalled, had been opposed to the popular front from at least March 1938 (see chapter five). Newburn and District LLP Minutes, 28/1/39 (NRON, 527/B/3)

¹¹⁷ *North Mail*, 24/3/39, p4

National Service. Elliott was 'heartily sickened' by Bowman's speech, especially his claims that the trade union movement 'had stood for peace in the September crisis' [i.e. supported the Munich settlement] and that Labour was 'always prepared for a party truce in times of adversity'.¹¹⁸ Bowman was suggesting an all-party truce here, as opposed to a popular front anti-Chamberlain truce. Either his views had changed very radically in less than a year, or he had supported the United Peace Alliance conference thinking that it was merely a conference for those desirous of 'peace'. Of course, the popular front was named the United Peace Alliance in 1938 precisely because it would sound less intimidating and less Communist. But it was surely an own goal to attract support from people who did not even know what the idea entailed. Regardless of whether Bowman represented a loss to the popular front cause by 1939, the popular front in general certainly had lost support in the north east since 1938. And, as argued in the previous chapter, its support in 1938 was minimal.

Moreover, the nature of the support of some of the key individuals can be questioned. Ellen Wilkinson was not prepared to take her support far enough to risk expulsion from the NEC. As has been seen, party loyalty characterised her approach. Chuter Ede's support for Cripps extended only as far as defending him from his treatment by the NEC rather than actually supporting his proposals. There is no evidence that Ede had changed his mind on the popular front since his comments on the Ellen Wilkinson popular front memorandum of late 1938. If he was a supporter, his support counted for little as it was not made obvious. Will Lawther backed down when the heat was on.¹¹⁹ Some individuals, though pro-popular front, did not choose to support Cripps' campaign at all. Willard Sexton (Hexham PPC, Labour) refused to sign a letter protesting at the NEC action over the popular front, despite the fact that he was 'still in favour of a popular front, but in my view it has been apparent for some time that there was not the slightest chance of carrying it at the Labour Party conference'.¹²⁰ Cripps also failed to convince some left wingers. Jim Stephenson was absent from Blaydon Labour Party's activities on the issue in 1939. As noted in chapter five, Stephenson did not support the popular front in 1938 and Cripps' arguments had not changed his mind. The support of Blenkinsop and Wilkes was important, but both of these were young men. The young are almost expected to be radical and rebellious, especially if they are middle class, as Blenkinsop and Wilkes were. Trevelyan also revealed flaws in his support of Cripps as he was

¹¹⁸ *Gateshead Weekly Pictorial Post*, 7/4/39, p16

¹¹⁹ Though the vote to suspend standing orders and allow Cripps to speak at the 1939 Labour conference was 'due principally' to Lawther and the miners.

C. Cooke, *op cit.*, p238

¹²⁰ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, p353

ignorant of his local party's feelings on the issue. In early February 1939 he confided to his wife that he did not know how Wansbeck DLP would deal with him, though he thought that 'In any case they will be very unwilling to let me go'.¹²¹ Just before he attended the Wansbeck DLP meeting he still did not have 'a conception what they are thinking in the rank-and-file'.¹²² This became clear to all when his attempt to secure support for Cripps was easily defeated.

Even where the Cripps Petition gained a degree of popular support, it was incapable of exerting any effect on the labour movement. In Bishop Auckland, only two weeks after the Cripps meeting had secured just over 100 signatures, the 115 helpers had managed to collect nearly 1,000 signatures for the Petition Campaign and they were still coming in. This was an impressive figure, but it did not convert into active support for Cripps in local labour movement organisations, imperative if the policy was to emerge victorious at Labour conference. Two people were expelled from Bishop Auckland DLP and the support for Cripps in the area seems to have disintegrated. The large number of signatures counted for nothing. Certainly, the main officials in the labour movement in the area were unmoved in their support of the NEC on the issue.¹²³

Cripps' Enemies in the North

The relatively small support that Cripps received in the north east is further understood if opponents of the campaign are scrutinised. Shinwell, who, apart from a very brief period in autumn 1938 opposed the popular front, had not changed his mind in 1939. At a Labour conference in Sheffield at the end of January 1939 he defended the party's 'right to take drastic action against any of its members, however prominent they were, who defied the declared resolutions of the annual conference of the party'.¹²⁴ At Wingate Shinwell wondered if the people who were attempting to drive the Labour Party into an alliance with other political organisations 'realised the damage they were doing to the working class cause'.¹²⁵ He thought that labour had a 'reasonable' chance at the polls but 'discord is reducing the chances of success'.¹²⁶ Presumably Seaham DLP was behind him on this, although there is no direct evidence that it was. Shinwell gave very little away regarding his attitude towards the popular front in his autobiographies and what he did say confuses the question. In *Conflict Without*

¹²¹ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 6/2/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

¹²² Ibid., 18/3/39

Curiously, when the meeting was over he told his wife that it had gone 'much as I expected'.

Ibid., 20/3/39

¹²³ *Sunday Sun*, 9/4/39, p9

¹²⁴ Though technically he had not done that in the case of the popular front.

Ibid., 29/1/39, p5

¹²⁵ *North Mail*, 30/1/39, p4

¹²⁶ Ibid.,

Malice he mentioned that Cripps approached him and Alfred Barnes with a paper which eventually led to Cripps' expulsion.¹²⁷ Ostensibly, this sounds like Cripps' popular front proposals of 1939. Yet, taken as a whole, the passage refers far more to the behaviour of the Socialist League and the united front and it seems that Shinwell conflated the Unity Campaign of 1937 and the Petition Campaign of 1939. Thus, Shinwell's account should not be taken as necessarily referring to the Cripps popular front campaign of 1939, as Eatwell has done.¹²⁸ In fact, Shinwell recalled being a member of the ILP in 1936, four years after the party had disaffiliated from the Labour Party. It would seem his memory, even in 1955, was not particularly sharp and *Lead With the Left* is even less detailed.¹²⁹ Slowe wrote that Shinwell was antagonised by Cripps' change of heart on the issue and his shift from support of an alliance with dissident Conservatives to condemnation of the Churchill group in 1939. Shinwell also thought Cripps was damaging the party and jealousy may have tainted his attitude towards Cripps.¹³⁰

Though few individuals spoke out against Cripps, the organisational support for the NEC against him was overwhelming in the region. As noted above, four north east DLPs (Bishop Auckland, Jarrow, Wansbeck and Newcastle East) and three of the four Newcastle DLPs in the City Labour Party all opposed Cripps and supported the NEC, along with four DMA lodges (Murton, West Thornley, Trimdon Grange, Houghton-le-Spring and Eden) and Durham County Labour Women's Sections. These were not the only north east labour movement bodies to openly oppose Cripps. In mid-February, Durham DLP, which had supported Communist affiliation to Labour in 1936, endorsed Cripps' expulsion (by 71 votes to 12). However, it was decided to await the Labour conference decision on Cripps before any action would be taken.¹³¹ Houghton-le-Spring DLP also passed a resolution supporting the NEC over Cripps.¹³² Jarrow and Wansbeck DLPs' support for the NEC was also a blow. That the other County Durham DLPs supported the NEC was predictable given their loyalty to the NEC over the United Peace Alliance in 1938 and their previous lack of involvement in the Unity Campaign. Some LLPs expressed opposition to Cripps. Bedlington Labour Party supported Cripps' expulsion (by 45 votes to 4). This was another blow to Cripps as the party had seemed quite left wing in 1937, with its united front sounding resolution (see chapter four). Like Durham Labour Women, Northumberland Labour Women's Advisory Council, at

¹²⁷ E. Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice* (Odhams Press, 1955) pp134-5

¹²⁸ R. Eatwell, op cit., p295

¹²⁹ E. Shinwell, *Lead With the Left. My First Ninety Six Years* (Cassell, 1981) pp102-108

¹³⁰ P. Slowe, *Manny Shinwell. An Authorised Biography* (Pluto, 1993) pp183-184

¹³¹ Durham DLP Minutes, 18/2/39 and 13/5/39 (DRO, D/SHO/93/2)

¹³² *North Mail*, 20/2/39, p7

their spring conference, seemed opposed to the popular front.¹³³ More significantly, in early April 1939 the NTFLP supported the NEC.¹³⁴

On the industrial side, the president of the Northern District Council of NUGMW, councillor J. Middleton, speaking in Newcastle, called Cripps' movement 'farcical' and stated that it was doomed, like other 'rebel causes', to 'meet an early death'.¹³⁵ He called on delegates to defeat the machinations of 'jitterbugs' and claimed that Cripps should have waited until the Labour conference. Following Middleton's lead, Houghton-le-Spring and district NUGMW passed a resolution supporting the NEC in expelling Cripps.¹³⁶ The pro-Cripps resolution from Woodhorn branch stimulated a vigorous reaction from the NCMA executive. Instead of acceding to the branches request to send a similar protest to the NEC over Cripps' expulsion, the executive decided to mandate its delegates to support the NEC.¹³⁷ In contrast, the NMA did not act either for or against Cripps before the Labour conference. Yet afterwards the NMA general secretary James Bowman was pleased that the conference had ended divisions over Cripps 'decisively'. Cripps had provided 'internal distractions' and had 'failed to convince the conference'.¹³⁸ The issue had disturbed the movement and 'impaired its efficiency and effectiveness during recent months'.¹³⁹ At the 1939 Typographical Association delegate meeting, a Durham delegate spoke against the popular front and the resolution supporting the popular front was heavily defeated.¹⁴⁰ In the north east, however, the lack of official DMA support was crucial.

Reasons for Cripps' Failure

Stafford Cripps' campaign failed with almost a 10-1 vote against him at the Labour annual conference in late May 1939. NUDAW, with 150,000 votes, was the only large trade union to support him and, in mid-June, Cripps wound up his campaign.¹⁴¹ Cripps' conduct of the Petition Campaign has been harshly judged by historians and this offers part of the explanation for its failure. Firstly, the flaws in Cripps' popular front memorandum have been highlighted. Eatwell's fairly positive approach to the popular front idea, and his acceptance of its necessity for a Labour election victory, did not preclude extensive criticism of Cripps.

¹³³ Ibid., 27/3/39, p5 and 7/3/39, p4

¹³⁴ Ibid., 3/4/39, p7

¹³⁵ *Sunday Sun*, 26/2/39, p11 and *North Mail*, 27/2/39, p5

¹³⁶ *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 10/3/39, p1

¹³⁷ There was no record of whether there was any voting on this resolution in the executive, so it cannot be determined whether there was any opposition to it from within the executive itself.

NCMA EC Minutes, 15/3/39 (NROM, 5021/A4/2)

¹³⁸ NMA *Quarterly Review*, July 1939, in NMA AR 1939 (NROM, 759/68)

¹³⁹ Ibid.,

¹⁴⁰ Typographical Association Report of Delegate Meetings, 1939 (WMRC, 39/A/TA/4/3/15)

¹⁴¹ *North Mail*, 30/5/39, p7; 31/5/39, p1; 2/6/39, p9 and 12/6/39, p1

Eatwell argued that Cripps' memorandum was understated, poorly researched and sloppily presented.¹⁴² G.D.H. Cole, who supported the popular front at the time, did not approve of the memorandum either. Cole thought that Cripps weakened the popular front's case as he argued for it solely on the terms of the Labour leadership, depicting it as an electoral strategy rather than as a device for immediately mobilising public opinion against government foreign policy. This allowed the NEC to retort that Cripps was 'surrendering socialism'. Moreover, Labour accused Cripps in 1939 'not without justice, of having radically changed his line'.¹⁴³ Cripps' opposition to rearmament also caused problems: he had no answer to those who wondered what would be used to back up the anti-appeasement foreign policy of a popular front government.¹⁴⁴ The confusion in Cripps' own mind over exactly who was to be included in a popular front was highlighted by Chris Bryant (although Cripps was opposed to Churchill and argued for the leadership of the left).¹⁴⁵

Eatwell also criticised Cripps' tactics, citing his refusal both to consult some left wingers before embarking on the campaign (such as Ellen Wilkinson) and to listen to others he consulted (such as Shinwell) and then remaining on the NEC whilst attacking it. Also, by focusing the campaign on himself, Cripps played into the hands of the Labour leadership and other opponents who could easily depict him as another Mosley.¹⁴⁶ Bryant seemed unsure of the efficacy of Cripps' tactics: he approved of Cripps sending his memorandum to DLPs as he 'stole a march' on the NEC, but this was ineffective as Cripps alienated the NEC. In fact, this action gave the NEC an excuse to punish him 'not for what he said but for how he had gone about saying it'.¹⁴⁷ Most agree that Cripps' speech at Labour conference, where he chose to concentrate on why he should have been allowed to behave as he had rather than arguing his case for the popular front, was another tactical error.¹⁴⁸ The tactic of collecting signatures was also flawed. It required a lot of work and was ineffective. As noted above, even the large

¹⁴² R. Eatwell, op cit., pp308-337

¹⁴³ G.D.H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party From 1914* (Augustus M. Kelley, New York, 1969, first published 1949) p358

Ralph Miliband endorsed Cole's criticisms.

R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (Merlin Press, second edition reprint 1987, second edition 1972, first edition 1961) pp256-267

¹⁴⁴ G.D.H. Cole, op cit., p359

¹⁴⁵ C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps. The First Modern Chancellor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) pp168-9

¹⁴⁶ R. Eatwell, op cit., pp308-337

Burgess echoed Eatwell's criticisms.

S. Burgess, *Stafford Cripps. A Political Life* (Gollancz, 1999) pp119-129

¹⁴⁷ C. Bryant, op cit., p171

¹⁴⁸ For examples, G.D.H. Cole, op cit., p359 and C. Bryant, op cit., p181

However, Cooke thought Cripps' choice of subject matter was wise. Cooke also praised Cripps for the work he put into the campaign.

C. Cooke, op cit., pp231-8

number of signatures collected at Bishop Auckland had no positive impact on the DLP.¹⁴⁹ On top of this was Cripps' insensitivity. Mervyn Jones described a line from Cripps' account of his ten week holiday in Jamaica as 'perhaps the most tactless sentence ever to appear in a left-wing paper'.¹⁵⁰ Raymond Challinor also criticised Cripps' personal conduct.¹⁵¹ As discussed above, those opposing Cripps in the north east used many of these arguments, especially the claim that Cripps' wealth was the only thing allowing him to pursue his campaign.

In addition to these problems were the weaknesses in Cripps' organisation. Eatwell argued that Cripps' petition organisation was under-funded, badly organised and inefficient. Whilst there were 321 local Petition Committees by the end of April 1939 and 450 in two thirds of all constituencies in Britain by mid-May, Eatwell claimed that many of these were nominal and that a third were in London.¹⁵² These organisational weaknesses were reflected in the north east. Unfortunately, the number of Petition Committees in the region is uncertain. Positive evidence exists for at least four, in Bishop Auckland, Newcastle, Durham and South Shields. It is conceivable that these were the only four in the region: there were only seven in the whole of South Wales, a region which, due to the relative domination of the CP, provided far more support for the popular front than the north east.¹⁵³ Yet, in Bishop Auckland, Cripps' organisation seems to have functioned relatively well.

However, it would be wrong to attribute too much importance to these particular factors. By laying the blame for failure of the popular front in 1939 at Cripps' feet, the implication is that the project could have been successful, if it had not been for Cripps. This was not the case. The failure of Cripps' campaign in the north east can be attributed to the same factors that ensured that the United Peace Alliance did not receive significant north east labour movement support in 1938. Cripps failed even to mobilise the support that the United Peace Alliance managed in May 1938. This may have had something to do with Cripps' particular programme and way of behaving which alienated some in the region, though this is unlikely as Cripps was popular enough in the north east for the DMA to vote him as a speaker

¹⁴⁹ And even if DLPs had been won over in significant numbers, there remained the problem of forcing the NEC to act. As we saw in chapter five, despite massive labour movement support for a national conference in 1938, the NEC refused to act and there seemed to be little local labour movement organisations could do. They could, of course, disaffiliate in protest and enter the political wilderness as the ILP had done in 1931. But this would have been a very drastic 'solution' and very unlikely to happen as these DLPs generally did not have the ideological problems with the NEC that the ILP had had. Despite the fact that more constituency representatives had been allowed on the NEC from 1937, it is remarkable how little practical control the constituency parties still had over the national party leadership. It was even more remarkable that they put up with this situation. That they did was a testament to their strong loyalty to the movement.

¹⁵⁰ M. Jones, *Michael Foot* (Gollancz, 1995) p66

¹⁵¹ R. Challinor, *The Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) p43

¹⁵² R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, pp358-360

¹⁵³ *Tribune*, 28/4/39, p12 and 12/5/39, p12

at its gala in 1939.¹⁵⁴ The timing of Cripps' campaign was crucial. The Co-operative Party and Liberals were either opposed to the popular front or lukewarm by spring 1939. There was also a rift between Liberals and Labour over conscription in early 1939, with Labour opposed and the Liberals in favour. In addition, Eatwell claimed that a decrease in public interest in foreign affairs in spring 1939 meant that the Petition Campaign came too late to capitalise on the aftermath of Munich; disgust at Munich became confusion and apathy. In fact, the increased resolution of the government on foreign policy and its apparent distancing of itself from appeasement after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia led to an improvement in its popularity by April 1939.¹⁵⁵

The primary purpose of the popular front, argued Foot, was to save Spain. When Franco marched into Madrid, 'there was no longer a Spain to save'.¹⁵⁶ As with the earlier united and popular front campaigns, the urgent situation in Spain did not galvanise large support for the popular front, rather it provided a distraction from it. Of course, this did, in some cases, work the other way round. An example was Trevelyan's decision to donate £100 to Cripps' Petition Campaign in February 1939, instead of giving it, as he had previously intended, to support a plan for sending raw materials to Spain. Trevelyan, very impressed by Cripps' plan, thought that: 'to fundamentally alter the position here and really threaten our government would be a bigger help to Spain than anything'.¹⁵⁷ However, Trevelyan only represented a small minority of labour movement opinion. This is revealed by the contrast between the very different levels of labour movement support secured by Cripps' and the Tyneside foodship campaigns, which were running concurrently (see chapter eight).¹⁵⁸ Trevelyan and other left wing Cripps supporters, such as Blenkinsop, also drew the erroneous conclusion that 'non-political' 'Aid Spain' campaigns illustrated a desire for wide political co-operation against appeasement. The experience of Cripps' abject failure to mobilise labour

¹⁵⁴ The DMA vote is a possible explanation for why Cripps chose the north east to launch his campaign, interpreting this vote as indicative of support for any political move he made. If this was the case then it merely illustrates Cripps' political naiveté or ignorance of the very low level of support the region provided for the United Peace Alliance. Alternatively, it is possible that the pre-planned *Tribune* meeting merely happened to coincide with the time Cripps wished to launch his campaign.

¹⁵⁵ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, pp364-8

James Hinton argued that Chamberlain's apparent abandonment of appeasement in spring 1939 was 'a victory of sorts' for the popular front agitation as it had as much to do with fear of a Conservative rebellion as any genuine rethinking of foreign policy.

J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism. A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974* (Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1983) p160

¹⁵⁶ M. Foot, *op cit.*, p296

¹⁵⁷ C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 6/2/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

¹⁵⁸ In retrospect, Trevelyan was wrong, although, of course, by February 1939, little short of extensive British and French military intervention on the side of the Republic could have saved it. Foodships, too, were too little

movement support in the north east must have disabused them of this idea. Had Cripps launched his campaign in 1938, when the United Peace Alliance was launched, it is likely he would have secured similar and perhaps slightly more support in the region, given that his campaign did have a central organisation (though his personal style may have alienated others). Yet he would almost certainly not have secured majority support, due to the factors discussed in chapter five.

The Cripps Effect

Most commentators have only attributed negative effects to Cripps' campaign at national level. Ben Pimlott claimed that some dissident Conservatives and Liberals could have been won over to a Parliamentary alliance but the fact that the most vocal support for a popular front came from the Labour left and CP 'killed' the idea as the Labour leadership would not associate with the Communists.¹⁵⁹ Thus the most important effect of Cripps' campaign was to limit the manoeuvrability of the Labour leadership which could not pursue a popular front in Westminster while disciplining popular front supporters within its own party.¹⁶⁰ Apart from this, Cripps' campaign has not been depicted as counter-productive, unlike the earlier Unity Campaign.¹⁶¹ In fact, the effects of both campaigns in the north east were similar.

Already weak, the left in the north east was not significantly weakened by NEC reprisals. Trevelyan was expelled but he was the only figure of national standing to be disciplined in the region. Moreover, his Parliamentary career had been over since 1931.¹⁶² In fact, that Trevelyan was prepared to be expelled for his beliefs may well have *increased* his standing in the movement. Even those who did not agree with him must have been impressed by his martyrdom. Other figures of a slightly lesser profile such as Lawther backed down.

and too late, and the number who saw them as aiding the Republic against fascism as opposed to simply aiding starving civilians is also unclear.

¹⁵⁹ B. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977) p5 and p202

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p179

¹⁶¹ Yet, like the Unity Campaign, it is difficult to find an historian who has anything positive to say about Cripps' Petition Campaign. James Jupp had, surprisingly given his relatively positive treatment of the Labour left, little to say on Cripps' campaign specifically. Willie Thompson, John Callaghan, Jim Fyrth, Noreen Branson, Eric Hobsbawm, Kevin Morgan and David Blaazer all depicted the popular front strategy, to a greater or lesser extent, in a positive light, but none of them dealt with the Petition Campaign in any detail.

J. Jupp, *op cit.*, p119; W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism, 1920-1991* (Pluto, 1992) pp42-64; J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt. A Study in British Stalinism* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1993) p173; J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) pp15, 244-245; K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989) pp45,49,51 and 309 and D. Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992) *passim*

¹⁶² Trevelyan noted this himself: 'I am glad to be in a position where I cannot have my life affected by their dreadful folly, except by having to look on at the failure of the Labour Party to win'. On the eve of his expulsion Trevelyan told his wife: 'To me personally it means nothing that matters, as I am not a candidate'.

Lesser ranking politicians such as Wilkes and Blenkinsop were allowed their rebellion without suffering serious consequences. It is debatable whether they would have been expelled had their profile been higher.¹⁶³ The only DLP that this did not hold for was Bishop Auckland, which expelled two members in 1939. The fate of the working class John Bell of Bishop Auckland DLP contrasts strongly with that of Blenkinsop and Wilkes, two up-and-coming middle class PPCs. In this case though, class is unlikely to have been the decisive factor in their relative fates. It is possible that the very success of the Petition Campaign in collecting signatures in the Bishop Auckland area made the local Labour leadership fearful enough to act against its main proponents. However, it is more likely that the fact that Dalton, a key opponent of Cripps on the NEC, was MP for Bishop Auckland made all the difference. Dalton's DLP was, after all, the only one in the region to expel members over their involvement in the Unity Campaign two years before. The north east labour movement was generally tolerant of its rebels; Lawther and Watson were permitted to continue supporting Cripps without reprimand from DMA council and resolutions on the topic were, like the United Peace Alliance the year before, not allowed to appear, which minimised division. This relative tolerance, which also ensured that divisions within the movement over Catholic attitudes to Labour policies on the Spanish civil war were also minimised, ensured very little bitterness over Cripps and negligible recrimination.

It is highly unlikely that the Cripps campaign increased the prestige of the left in the north east (apart from that of the martyred Trevelyan), nor of course, did it foster internal 'unity' and understanding. But it did not have any significant adverse effects either. Lawther and Watson moved significantly to the right during the war and after. Did involvement in the Cripps campaign go some way to convincing them that the politics of the Labour left was wrong-headed? In the case of Lawther, it appears not. The decisive moment for Lawther was the Hitler-Stalin pact of summer 1939 and the subsequent Communist declaration that the war against Germany was an imperialist war and should be opposed.¹⁶⁴ This was the first event to turn him against Communism, and, by association, its allies on the Labour left. Given the strong similarities in Lawther and Watson's outlook in the thirties, it is probable that Watson took a similar course for similar reasons. The Cripps campaign certainly did not alienate other

C.P. Trevelyan letters to wife, 6/2/39 and 24/3/39 (NRL, CPTEX133)

¹⁶³ As noted above, Wilkes was prevented from chairing a LBC rally in September 1938 due to the intervention of Transport House. Perhaps, this time, he was overlooked as Transport House had more important individuals to deal with and was aware that too extensive a witch hunt would be damaging.

Gateshead Labour Herald, 9/38, p2

¹⁶⁴ L.H. Mates, 'From Revolutionary to Reactionary: The Life of Will Lawther', M.A. Thesis, Newcastle University (1996) pp35-37

left wingers in the region. Steve Lawther and Henry Bolton continued to follow the Moscow line (though of course not the Cripps one) in the war years.¹⁶⁵ If the latter two were representative of the Labour left, then the failure of Cripps' campaign caused little disenchantment in the left rank-and-file. (In fact, nothing Soviet Russia did, from the Hitler-Stalin pact to the invasion of Finland in 1942 alienated these people either).¹⁶⁶ Roger Eatwell argued that the decrease in membership of popular front supporting Labour Parties indicated disenchantment engendered in the party after defeat of the popular front. In this connection, he cited the 53% decline in the membership of Jarrow DLP 1939-1940, which was well over the national average of 32%.¹⁶⁷ The large decline could be explained this way, but it was a little strange given that *only* Jarrow LP&TC supported Cripps. Eatwell was mistaken not to distinguish between this and Jarrow DLP, which actually *supported* the NEC. Perhaps the war had a disproportionately disruptive effect in Jarrow, due to the high unemployment in the town and the consequent fact that few were employed in important war industries and thus available for the armed forces or to work elsewhere in war industries. The Cripps campaign did stimulate debate on the popular front in the north east, but very few were convinced by the arguments in favour.

Against the few minor negative effects the Cripps campaign had in the region, can be set its small positive effects. Jupp pointed out that 'the propaganda of the Left in the last three years of the decade did much to awaken public opinion to the ineffectiveness of the National Government's foreign policy, and to the implications of the spread of Fascism'.¹⁶⁸ The left was active on this subject in the north east and must have had some similar effect. Ironically, as pointed out by Estorick, in arguing his case for a popular front at meetings in the region, Cripps succeeded in recruiting significant numbers to the party that had just expelled him.¹⁶⁹ In North Shields, Cripps' appeal for the audience to join the Labour Party produced an increase of nearly 30% in local party membership. At Bishop Auckland there were 47 new Labour Party members thanks to Cripps.¹⁷⁰ The positive effects of Cripps' meetings on the grass roots, especially in the smaller towns and places in the region where Labour was moribund, such as

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp35 and 57

¹⁶⁶ Though not noted as being involved in the Cripps campaign, S.H. Fominson (organiser of the 'Unity Club' in South Shields), for example, saw in the Nazi-Soviet pact evidence of Russia's desire for peace. He had recently returned from a visit to Russia.

Shields Gazette, 28/8/39, p4 and 30/8/39, p2

¹⁶⁷ R. Eatwell, op cit., pp380-382

¹⁶⁸ J. Jupp, op cit., p123

¹⁶⁹ Estorick claimed that Cripps' campaign 'proved to be the biggest recruiting agent the party had had in years'.

E. Estorick, *Stafford Cripps. A Biography* (Heinemann, 1949) p166

¹⁷⁰ *Tribune*, 10/2/39, p1; 6/4/39, p13 and *Sunday Sun*, 26/3/39, p13

North Shields, should not be ignored or played down as historians such as Ben Pimlott have done.¹⁷¹ These effects should not be over-emphasised either. Given the weakness of the Labour Party in North Shields and Tynemouth, it is relatively easy to increase a very small number by 30%.

Again like the Unity Campaign, the overall picture is one of the majority of labour movement moderates in the region allowing the left and their few supporters to get on with their campaign and then comprehensively defeating them in votes on the issue in every DLP except one. The experience of the Petition Campaign in the north east largely reflected the national picture. The campaign failed to secure significant support from any section of the labour movement in an important region. Large support for Cripps in a moderate Labour region such as the north east would have suggested that his campaign could have been more successful. This support did not materialise. The north east retained its traditional loyalty to the Labour leadership and remained convinced that salvation lay in the electoral victory of a diverse and un-regimented labour movement, which was already a popular front, rather than in alliance with a declining political force which could not be trusted to deliver its supporters' votes. The United Peace Alliance failed in the region for these reasons in 1938. Cripps' campaign came at a less propitious time and, despite his energy and resources, Cripps failed even to muster the numbers that had been mobilised in the previous year. This failure was not due to Cripps' personality, nor to the subtleties of his programme and his largely ill-conceived tactics (although perhaps it should have been). This and the previous chapters have concentrated on the attitudes of the labour movement, which were, of course, crucial to the success of the project. However, another part of the explanation for the failure of the popular front in the north east lies in the attitudes of the labour movement's proposed allies, Liberals and dissident Conservatives. The next chapter discusses the extent to which the popular front drew support from those outside of the labour movement in the region.

¹⁷¹ B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton*, pp257-62

CHAPTER SEVEN

The 'Capitalists': Liberals, Conservatives and the Popular Front

The previous two chapters have shown that the appeal of the popular front in the north east labour movement was very limited. This was its fatal flaw both nationally and regionally as almost everyone who argued for a popular front was explicit about the need for it to be led by the Labour Party. But, of course, for a popular front to emerge, it had to receive support from other parties: Liberals, in general, and dissident or 'progressive' Conservatives who disagreed strongly with the appeasement policies of their government. This chapter will analyse the attitudes of north east Liberals and Conservatives and assess the extent to which the popular front drew support from the 'capitalist' parties.

Liberal Attitudes

Several important national Liberal Party figures supported the popular front. The Liberal leader Archibald Sinclair and three Liberal MPs, Wilfred Roberts, Geoffrey Mander and Sir Richard Acland, had subscribed to the idea since 1936. In May 1938 the Liberal Party itself backed the popular front and restated this support in the wake of Munich.¹ Vernon Bartlett, who won the Bridgwater by-election as an independent progressive in November 1938, was a Liberal. Ostensibly, some north east Liberals should have been favourable to the popular front as they took the same view of foreign relations as the Labour Party. There is plenty of evidence in the regional press throughout the late thirties of Liberals calling for collective security and the incorporation of Russia within this system.² For example, in late 1936, S. Phillips, then secretary of the Northern Liberal Federation and chairperson of Newcastle Central Division, spoke at Newcastle urging a mutual assistance pact between 'peaceful countries including Russia'.³ Phillips saw Germany as the 'centre of disturbance in Europe' as 'she desired those things that could only be achieved through war, and was content to attain them through war'.⁴

¹ Roger Eatwell has provided the most detailed account of Liberal attitudes to the popular front. R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975)

² The only printed records left by Liberals in the north east in this period were those of Newcastle Liberal Club. Unfortunately this Club was more a social organisation than a political one, so it provides no useful evidence. Thus there is no indication of the reaction to a talk given by the pro-popular front Liberal MP Wilfred Roberts to Newcastle Liberal Club on the Spanish situation in April 1937. The General Committee Minutes are very scant and almost impossible to read.

Newcastle Liberal Club Records (TWAS, 200) and *North Mail*, 26/4/37, p6

³ *North Mail*, 9/12/36, p5

⁴ *Ibid.*,

Yet, despite this and the fact that the Liberal Party nationally had endorsed the popular front in 1938, there was very little direct evidence of north east Liberal involvement in the United Peace Alliance campaign. The United Peace Alliance conference in May 1938 had around 100 organisations represented at it, an indeterminate number of which were ‘progressive organisations’ outside of the labour movement. However, the only organisation which probably contained Liberals (and which itself represented the popular front in microcosm) that was definitely represented, was the LBC.⁵ Moreover, none of the high profile politicians in the region who endorsed the conference were Liberals, suggesting that they were distinctly lukewarm to the popular front. Outside of this direct popular front agitation was activity that took on the appearance of a popular front. As argued in chapter one, the activities of the north east peace councils from 1936 fell into this category and this continued in 1937 and 1938. Thus, for example, Enid Atkinson of Lloyd George’s Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction (CAPR), spoke at the very successful TJPC meeting in Newcastle in late September 1938 (although it is not clear if Atkinson explicitly called for a popular front).⁶ Apart from the activities of the two peace councils, it was only in Blaydon that there was evidence of popular front activity outside of the single United Peace Alliance conference.⁷ And even there, the evidence of the involvement of organisations outside of the labour movement was small. Blaydon Labour Party invited Youth Peace Groups, British Legions and churches to its ‘Solidarity with the people of Spain’ demonstration in June 1938 but it is uncertain which, if any, of these groups participated.⁸ In the aftermath of Munich, only one north east Liberal organisation, Newcastle West Liberal Association, obviously supported the Liberal Party’s renewed endorsement of the popular front. Even then, there was no indication that Liberals in Newcastle West acted on the resolution by attempting to build links with the labour movement in the town.⁹

The lack of obvious north east Liberal support for the popular front was equally evident in 1939. The Liberal organisation issued a national circular to Liberal Associations stating that there would be no official participation in Cripps’ Petition Campaign, although individual Liberals could participate. Yet only one ‘liberal’ figure was involved in the Cripps campaign from the evidence: Enid Atkinson (CAPR) who addressed the Gateshead ‘unity’

⁵ *Blaydon Courier*, 3/6/38, p5 and *Daily Worker*, 27/5/38, p3

⁶ *North Mail*, 26/9/38, p5

A TJPC resolution calling for the recall of Parliament and the need to protect Czechoslovakia received support from the labour movement and CAPR.

North Mail, 21/9/38, p5

⁷ The four popular front SMACs have been excluded from this as they are dealt with in chapter eight.

⁸ *Blaydon Courier*, 10/6/38, p5; 17/6/38, p1 and *North Mail*, 13/6/38, p7

conference in March 1939.¹⁰ This was part of a national phenomenon as CAPR branches formed the basis of Petition Committees in some localities.¹¹ The CAPR had been involved with the north east peace councils from 1936. Apart from this, the only direct evidence of Liberal support for the Cripps Petition Campaign was at Bishop Auckland where an indeterminate number who signed the Cripps Petition were Liberals.¹² However, the CAPR was the only 'liberal' body that showed up in the evidence and, despite being the creation of Lloyd George, it was not strictly aligned with the party.

In addition, the CAPR nationally was a small organisation and this was reflected in the CAPR 'north area'. The only evidence of a local CAPR branch is that at Willington, which, formed from the anti-Labour Willington Socialist Society by the demagogic Charles Wilson and his followers, seems to have only lasted a month (June 1937).¹³ The north area CAPR appears to have been a small group of middle class radicals and John Brown's comment that the CAPR generally included 'a great deal of rank but no file' was particularly pertinent.¹⁴ Nationally there was a feeling in the CAPR that it had done well out of its involvement in the Spain and China relief campaigns and the Cripps Petition campaign, which enabled the recruitment of some disillusioned Labour Party members.¹⁵ It is thus possible that the north area CAPR membership reflected this growth and doubled or trebled in this period, although it is not difficult to double a very small membership. There is, however, no positive evidence that this occurred: the names connected with the CAPR in 1936 were largely the same as in 1939.

An important regional Liberal, Raymond Jones (Liberal PPC for South Shields), appeared to have been a potential recruit to Cripps' campaign. In a speech to South Shields Liberal Association AGM in February 1939, Jones indicated possible support for the popular front, which was particularly significant as South Shields remained a relative bastion of liberalism. Outlining the history of Chamberlain's failures Jones said: 'It was high time there was a change of government in this country. The Labour Party was so engrossed in seeking a socialist state that it preferred to risk a continuance of the present government rather than join hands with any other party in defeating it'.¹⁶ This speech was important as before 1939 Jones spent as much time attacking Labour as the government. In September 1937 he castigated

⁹ *North Mail*, 9/12/38, p11

¹⁰ *Tribune*, 3/3/39, p19

¹¹ R. Eatwell, op cit., pp341-2

¹² *Sunday Sun*, 12/3/39, p11 and *Tribune*, 6/4/39, p13

¹³ Willington CAPR branch apparently had 53 active, financial members.

Durham Chronicle, 4/6/37, p8 and 18/6/37, p11

¹⁴ J. Brown, *The Road to Power* (Selwyn & Blount, 1937) p256

¹⁵ R. Eatwell, op cit., pp390-392

¹⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 11/2/39, p1

Labour for not appearing to know what socialism meant before going on to condemn the government. Around the same time he criticised Russia, another barrier to his possible involvement in the popular front. Again, in the same period, Jones stated that 20 years had been wasted because of the existence of the Labour Party.¹⁷ Jones' criticism of Labour continued into the crisis period of late 1938. At the time of Munich he chastised Chamberlain, but the 'only hope' to save democracy was, for Jones, not a popular front, but to rebuild liberalism and for the League of Nations to remove tariff barriers to reduce friction between states.¹⁸ He remained critical of Labour's attitude. The rest of Jones' February 1939 speech revealed that his point of view had not radically altered: peculiarly, Jones' solution to the problem of the government's foreign policy and Labour's commitment to a socialist state was that 100 Liberals were needed in Parliament as a 'safeguard'.¹⁹ Jones did not mention the popular front by name. Moreover, if he was favourable to the popular front, there is no evidence that he did anything about it (such as involve himself in Cripps' campaign or other popular front agitation).

Of the significant north east Liberals, Jones went the furthest down the path of supporting the popular front in 1939. Others revealed more sympathy with the government. For example, in April 1939, M.R. Shankcross (secretary of the Northern Liberal Federation), said that whilst the government's foreign policy had problems, Liberals 'will support it so long as it continues with the policy of collective security' and that although the present situation was due to the government's foreign policy 'this was not the time for recriminations'.²⁰ Bizarrely, he thought that the country was now united 'left to right' behind the government.²¹

As has been seen, a handful of lesser 'moderate' politicians in the region involved themselves in left activity that took on the appearance of a popular front. In 1936, the Progressive lord mayor of Newcastle, alderman J. Grantham, sent a letter of support to a left-organised meeting on Spain in August and provided hospitality for returning Hunger Marchers in November.²² In Tynemouth the Moderate councillor Stanley Holmes supported the Communist organised anti-Means Test march in mid-October and appeared on a TJPC platform in November 1936 (see chapter one). Holmes was particularly significant as he had

¹⁷ Ibid., 27/9/37, p4; 2/10/37, p4 and 15/10/37, p11

¹⁸ Ibid., 13/10/38, p5

¹⁹ Ibid., 11/2/39, p1

²⁰ Ibid., 20/4/39, p5

²¹ Ibid.,

²² Presumably Grantham was a Liberal rather than a Conservative, but this is not certain due to the lack of a national party label.

Daily Worker, 18/8/36, p5 and *Newcastle Journal*, 17/11/36, p5

Grantham was only elected lord mayor at the beginning of August.

been Tynemouth Liberal PPC in the 1931 and 1935 general elections. Yet this involvement with the left did not translate into overt support for the popular front campaigns themselves. There is no record of Holmes, or of any other of these individuals, explicitly supporting the popular front. Moreover, regardless of Holmes' attitude, Tynemouth Liberals opposed co-operation with Labour.

Tynemouth was particularly important in the study of north east liberal attitudes to the popular front. A split vote between Labour and the Liberals allowed the Conservative victory in the 1935 general election. It was in this type of constituency that it would be reasonable to expect evidence of popular front co-operation, especially given the weakness of the labour movement there and the strength of liberalism.²³ Tynemouth Labour Party supported the popular front in 1939. However, in contrast to Holmes' behaviour, Tynemouth Liberals attempted to co-operate with Conservatives. Nationally, anti-Labour electoral pacts between Liberals and Conservatives began after 1918, when Labour started to have an impact in local elections. Thus, for examples, a Progressive Party was formed in Sheffield and a Municipal Alliance in Hull. Pacts such as this had been agreed in virtually all north east towns by 1930 and there was one at Tynemouth before 1936.²⁴ In practice, the anti-socialist pact did not work well at Tynemouth. Both Liberals and Conservatives took the 'Moderate' label at elections but they still stood against other Moderates.²⁵ In the November 1936 municipal elections, Tynemouth Liberals and Conservatives made a concerted effort to ensure a straight fight for their candidates against the left but the talks failed.²⁶ Another chance to make the pact work better came almost immediately. The winning Moderate in Dockwray ward was elected an alderman and Gray (the Communist candidate who came third to two Moderates in the main election) stood again in the ensuing by-election. Again, fearing that a split vote would benefit the Communist, the Moderates held talks about the candidature. Ultimately, these talks also came to nothing as Gray eventually faced *five* Moderate candidates in December 1936.²⁷ Yet

Blyth News, 27/7/36, p4 and 13/8/36, p4

²³ As recently as 1930 Tynemouth was one of five boroughs in Britain where Liberals were still the largest party (with 18 of the 36 councillors).

C. Cook, 'Liberals, Labour And Elections', in G. Peele & C. Cook (eds.), *The Politics of Reappraisal* (Macmillan, 1975) p170

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp169-170 and 178

²⁵ In fact, split Moderate votes occurred at Tynemouth throughout the early thirties. In 1934 Moderates stood against each other and Labour or Communist candidates in four wards. However, this did not happen in 1935. *Evening Chronicle*, 2/11/34, p6 and 2/11/35, p4

²⁶ In all three contests against left candidates (two Labour and one Communist), the Moderate vote was split. A three-way split Moderate vote in Milbourn ward allowed Labour victory by 30 votes.

Shields News, 7/10/36, p1; 8/10/36, p3; *North Mail*, 24/10/36, p9; 3/11/36, p9 and *Evening Chronicle*, 3/11/36, p6

²⁷ Gray increased his vote by 80 and was beaten into second place by only 17 votes.

Shields News, 6/11/36, p3; 13/11/36, p1; 3/12/36, p5 and *North Mail*, 3/12/36, p7

this was not the end of the matter. In February 1937, the president of Tynemouth Ratepayers' Association warned that 'unless the Moderate forces combine and show a united front, it will be inevitable that the Communist and Socialist forces will obtain command in this town also'.²⁸ Attempts to establish a firmer electoral understanding continued throughout spring 1937 though subsequently the Liberals refused to finalise arrangements with Conservatives due to a 'bitter feeling' which militated against it.²⁹

The case of Tynemouth contradicts Cook's claim that that no Moderates stood against each other in the period as Liberals could not afford to act outside of these pacts.³⁰ In Tynemouth, even though Conservatives and Liberals stood as Moderates, they still stood against each other. The crucial point is, though, that Liberals were attempting to establish further electoral understandings with Conservatives rather than trying to forge an anti-Conservative, popular front alliance with Labour. In his article on the popular front, Dalton argued that the Liberal vote was more likely to go to Labour in constituencies where both Liberals and Labour were weak and where even a combined vote could not defeat the Conservative. But in constituencies where Labour 'grows strong, Liberals have a habit, [...] of entering into compacts with Conservatives, [...] to "keep Labour out"'.³¹ Ostensibly, Tynemouth did not fit this paradigm exactly as Labour was weak in the municipal council. However, in 1935 Labour had, for the first time, come second to the Conservative in the general election, usurping the Liberals. (The Liberal secured 23.1% of the vote compared to Labour's 29.8%). A combined Labour-Liberal vote would have defeated many Conservatives at municipal level (assuming such a pact could be made to work better than the attempted Conservative-Liberal 'united front') and would have almost certainly won the parliamentary seat for the popular front (assuming the majority of Liberal voters were prepared to vote for a popular front candidate). Thus the situation in Tynemouth supported Dalton's case against the popular front. And, from the limited evidence, it seems that Liberals in Tynemouth characterised north east attitudes in general. Thus, it is highly unlikely that there would have

²⁸ This was an overstatement. Moderates dominated Tynemouth council and there was no chance that their control could be threatened by Labour, whether combined with Communists or not, in the near future. *Shields News*, 2/2/37, p1

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24/5/37, p5

Thus splits in the Moderate vote continued. In November 1937, the Moderates seem to have been calling themselves Independents in Tynemouth. In two wards, two Independents stood against a single Labour candidate. Calling themselves Moderates again in 1938, Labour gained Chirton ward, presumably as two Moderates were also contesting it. However, the fact that two other Moderates contested a Labour-held seat in Linskill ward did not prevent Labour from losing it.

Evening Chronicle, 2/11/37, p10 and 2/11/38, p9

³⁰ C. Cook, *op cit.*, p179

³¹ H. Dalton, 'The Popular Front', *Political Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.4 (October-December 1936) p486

been any local electoral arrangements between anti-government parties in the north east in the event of a general election.³²

Why Were North East Liberals Opposed to the Popular Front?

Some of the reasons that Labour opposed the popular front obviously did not apply to Liberals. The popular front programme was based on radical Liberal foreign policy concerns and neglected domestic policies, which was where Liberal and Labour most diverged. The fact that there is little evidence of north east Liberal attitudes to foreign policy in the regional press may suggest general disinterest in the international situation or complacency about it.

Alternatively, it may merely be a reflection of the relative insignificance of Liberals in the region. Certainly, Raymond Jones was interested in the topic, in an area where Liberals were still a force. The most important battle in terms of forming a successful popular front was that inside the labour movement in securing leadership support for the idea. As the labour movement was by far the strongest opponent of Chamberlain and appeasement in the region, this was certainly the case. But this did not mean that labour movement popular front advocates forgot about their prospective allies to the right. Though the main popular front events in the region in 1938 and 1939 were labour movement organised and based, several of the press reports on these events explicitly stated that Liberals and other 'progressive' organisations were invited to attend. If Liberals did not attend, it was not because they had not been asked.

Other aspects of the popular front that alienated Labour Party members applied equally to the Liberals. Many did not wish to ally with Communists, for the same reasons as Labour (and the fact that Communists traditionally proposed to end capitalism). It was no accident that the Tynemouth Ratepayer's Association spokesperson implied in February 1937 that Labour and Communists represented some kind of combined electoral threat, despite the fact that Labour in Tynemouth was not in the slightest interested in allying with Communists (see chapter four). Associating Communists and Labour in the eyes of the public was an attempt to discredit Labour. As with north east labour movement attitudes, there was no evidence suggesting that the Moscow Show Trials worsened the image of the CP in the eyes of Liberals. Communism was theoretical anathema to liberalism and that was enough. The fact that Communist policy in the late thirties was often more moderate than that of Labour, and that Communists were performing a counter-revolutionary role in Spain in alliance with Liberals

³² Eatwell argued that there was likely to have been between 30 and 50 such agreements in Britain. Thus, the popular front could well have secured some kind of success. Eatwell made little of this important point. R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, p376

and moderate Socialists, was lost on Liberals.³³ It was, of course, lost on most of the left as well, so Liberals were not uniquely ignorant in this respect.³⁴

In 1939, the Liberal leader Archibald Sinclair became reluctant to support an alliance which he thought would entail the withdrawal of all but 40 or 50 Liberal candidates; a serious blow to a party which was attempting to maintain itself as a national force. Roger Eatwell claimed that many Liberals in the north opposed the popular front as they feared that an alliance would ultimately lead to the eclipse of the party.³⁵ This was the very opposite of the argument used by Labour Party opponents of the popular front who feared that it might provoke a Liberal revival. Depending on the precise mechanics of a popular front electoral pact, both arguments were plausible. Liberal fears of being eclipsed were certainly justified in the north east. In 1935, the only north east Liberal MP lost to Labour in a straight fight at Bishop Auckland (and Liberals only stood candidates in three other north east constituencies). Assuming that the popular front party with the best placed candidate in 1935 would automatically choose the candidate at a future general election, Liberals would have had no candidates in the region. They came closest in Tynemouth, but, in 1935, still secured 6.7% less of the vote than Labour.³⁶ However, Liberal popular front supporters could have argued that the party, without an alliance with Labour, would not win a seat in the region anyway. Moreover, it was possible that an electoral agreement would mean that Labour would have to stand down in a north east constituency to allow the Liberal a free run. This scenario must have informed Labour fears of a Liberal revival.³⁷

In the north east, the Liberal fear of the electoral challenge posed by Labour led to local pacts with Conservatives. In Tynemouth, this pact did not function at all well. But Liberals still concentrated on trying to make it work rather than ally with Labour. Ultimately, the pact could not be made to work, which illustrates the desire Tynemouth Liberals retained

³³ See, for example, 'Spilling the Spanish Beans' in G. Orwell, *Orwell in Spain* (Penguin, 2001) pp215-222 and F. Brockway, *The Workers' Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) pp73-147

³⁴ The left's ignorance was largely due, as Orwell explained, to the 'Communist command of the press. Apart from their own press they also have the whole of the capitalist anti-fascist press (papers like the *News Chronicle*) on their side, because the latter have got on to the fact that official Communism is now anti-revolutionary. The result is that they have been able to put across an unprecedented amount of lies and it is impossible to get anyone to print anything in contradiction'.

Orwell letter to Geoffrey Gorer, 15/9/37 in G. Orwell, *op cit.*, p252

Though Liberal newspapers like the *News Chronicle* realised that 'official' Communism was now anti-revolutionary, it seems that north east Liberals retained an outdated understanding of it.

³⁵ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, pp206 and 279

³⁶ Liberals polled relatively well in South Shields in 1935 (28.3%) but Labour won this seat with 48.1%.

³⁷ It was possible that the pact would entail progressive candidatures instead of using party labels. This created scenarios that could be used to support both Liberal fears of eclipse and Labour fears of a Liberal revival. Whether progressive candidatures could have mobilised the majority of both Labour and Liberal votes must remain a matter for speculation.

for a degree of autonomy in an area where they remained relatively strong. Yet the proliferation of local 'anti-socialist' electoral pacts, most of which worked far better than that at Tynemouth, suggests a strong ideological aspect to Liberal attitudes in the north east: that Liberals identified themselves with Conservatives, who were also capitalists, rather than with Labour, which they regarded, rightly or wrongly, as socialist.³⁸ Thus, it was not only communism that put Liberals off the popular front, it was socialism too. This fundamental ideological underpinning was more important in determining attitudes than the fact that Liberal and Labour foreign policies were very similar and ostensibly allowed for a joint campaign. Thus Eatwell's contention that Liberals could have been brought into a popular front based around Labour's *Immediate Programme* is very doubtful for north east Liberals.³⁹ Regardless of whether the programme was 'socialist', the fact that it was the Labour Party's programme would surely have been enough for Liberals to *perceive it as socialist* and therefore oppose it. That north east Labour also described their programme as socialist (such as, most importantly, in the DCFLP anti-popular front circular of May 1938, discussed in chapter five) further emphasised these ideological dividing lines. This was Liberal 'loyalty': not to the party as such, but to liberal principles, which revolved around the idea that capitalism was a reformable system that could be used to maximise the freedom of all, and that socialism (as well as communism) posed a threat to this 'freedom'. Left wing critics of the popular front, such as the ILP, argued that an alliance with capitalists was doomed. Liberals in the north east largely thought an alliance with socialists was a non-starter, too.

There was another important aspect of the more 'conservative' nature of north east Liberalism.⁴⁰ The National Liberal Party in the region was much stronger than its 'independent' equivalent. In 1935 there were National Liberal candidates in five constituencies: they were successful in Sunderland, Gateshead and Newcastle East and defeated in straight fights with Labour in Consett and Durham. Thus, the majority of north east Liberals had chosen to stay with the National Government. These Liberals were already tied up in a parliamentary pact with Conservatives and therefore would be very difficult, if not impossible, to attract to a pact

³⁸ For example, the pact at Newcastle. Cook was broadly correct to cite Newcastle as an example of where Moderates did not stand against each other, although the situation was complicated by the presence of Independents, Moderates, Progressives and Municipal Reformers all standing in different numbers at each election.

C. Cook, *op cit.*, p179

³⁹ R. Eatwell, *op cit.*, pp214-216

⁴⁰ This was not a new development. B.E. Naylor claimed that the Liberal Party in the north east was to the right of the party nationally in the Edwardian period. For this reason, more progressive Liberals joined the ILP, which in turn placed the ILP to the right of the party nationally. This partly explains why the Labour Party in the region became a 'bastion of right wing labourism'.

with Labour (especially as none of them seemed to have any problems with Chamberlain's foreign policy; see below).

Liberal voters in the north east appear to have been largely to the right side of the Liberal political spectrum too. The evidence of voting patterns suggests that, in the absence of a Liberal candidate, Liberal supporters voted Conservative rather than Labour. For example, at Barnard Castle in 1931 Labour lost in a straight fight to the Conservatives. In 1935 a Liberal candidate took 6.1% of the vote. The Conservative vote decreased by 11.1% (from 55.3% to 44.2%) whilst the Labour vote increased by 5.1% (from 44.7% to 49.8%).⁴¹ Thus, though there was a swing to Labour, it appears that the Liberal vote came from the Conservative. Alienated by communism and socialism and prepared to ally either permanently at parliamentary level or simply at local electoral level with fellow capitalists, it is hardly surprising that the very small 'independent' Liberal forces in the north east did not provide any noticeable support for the popular front. Sinclair feared that a popular front alliance with Labour would mean the loss of many members on the right of the party. A national popular front agreement would surely have completely ended the small independent Liberal presence in the region.

North East Conservative Attitudes

The developing appeasement policies of the Chamberlain government in the late thirties provoked some opposition from the government's own supporters.⁴² Anthony Eden resigned from the cabinet as foreign minister in February 1938 in protest at Chamberlain's personal conduct of government foreign policy. Winston Churchill and his acolytes provided a critique of appeasement from the back-benches and the progressive Conservative MP for Stockton, Harold Macmillan, also openly opposed appeasement.⁴³ A small group of dissident backbenchers centred around each of these groups and, as noted in chapter five, at the time of Munich there was some contact between these 'rebels' and the Labour Party, although nothing

B.E. Naylor, 'Ramsay Macdonald and Seaham Labour Politics', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.15 (1981) pp30-1

⁴¹ F.W.S. Craig, *British Parliamentary Election Results, 1918-1949* (Macmillan, revised edition, 1977) pp136, 196, 201-204, 247, 254-255, 260, 263, 338-348, 440-442.

⁴² The appeasement policy has been the source of much historical debate. For a recent critical account of Chamberlain and appeasement see R.J.Q. Adams, *British Politics and Foreign Policy in the Age of Appeasement 1935-9* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1993). For a defence of Chamberlain see J. Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (Papermac, Basingstoke, 1991). For a balanced yet critical recent study see F. McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1998)

⁴³ For a good discussion of this topic, see N.J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism. The Conservative Party and the European Dictators, 1935-1940* (Routledge, 1997)

concrete came of this. A group of government MPs abstained in a vote on Munich in Parliament in early October 1938.⁴⁴

The only direct evidence of rank-and-file Conservative support for the popular front in the north east was the indeterminate number of Conservatives who signed the Cripps Petition at Bishop Auckland.⁴⁵ However, it was possible that some other Conservatives were potential popular front supporters. In assessing the attitudes of Conservative and Liberal and Labour National individuals and organisations, it first has to be established that they were anti-fascist.⁴⁶ Secondly, there should be evidence that they were dissatisfied with their government's foreign policy because they thought it was effectively pro-fascist.⁴⁷ If the individual or organisation meets these criteria, this is evidence of *potential* popular front support.

Several north east government supporters were sympathetic towards Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Franco in Spain.⁴⁸ Alfred Denville MP (Conservative, Newcastle Central) was prominent in the latter category, though he also expressed sympathy for Mussolini and, in October 1937, went on a 'road seeing' tour of Germany.⁴⁹ Yet, as a Catholic, Denville's real bugbear was Republican Spain and his favourite Christian crusader, General Franco. Denville

⁴⁴ Pimlott and Bryant put the number of abstentions on the Munich vote at between 30 and 40 government MPs (Pimlott noting that 22 sat in their seats as the vote was taking place). Burgess claimed there were 30 abstentions and Thompson claimed 22, adding that others 'may have chosen to abstain less ostentatiously than those who sat in the Chamber to be counted by newspaper reporters while MPs trooped through the lobbies'. B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) p259; C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps. The First Modern Chancellor* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) p166; S. Burgess, *Stafford Cripps. A Political Life* (Gollancz, 1999) p117 and N. Thompson, *The Anti Appeasers. Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 30s* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971) p189

⁴⁵ *Tribune*, 6/4/39, p13

Like the Liberals, there is very little of use in many of the north east Conservative Party records. For example, Preston Ward (North Shields) Women's Branch Annual Meetings (TWAS, 1633/20 & /22) This contains information on general fund raising and social activities and nothing else. There is no useful information in the Labour Committee Minutes and ARs (TWAS, 1633/51/1) nor in Newcastle West Division Women's Association Minutes (TWAS, 1579/8)

⁴⁶ There were eleven National Government MPs in the north east after 1935: eight Conservatives and three National Liberals. The National Labour Party hardly existed in the region. In 1935 it only fielded candidates in Seaham (Ramsay Macdonald's seat) and South Shields. In February 1938 Cuthbert Headlam complained that the Conservative Party could not find any 'National Socialists' [sic.] to support Conservative speakers. Headlam Diary, 25/2/38 (DRO, D/HE/34)

⁴⁷ Many Conservatives were better described as 'anti-Nazi' as they saw the threat that an expansionist Germany posed to the British empire and opposed Hitler on those grounds rather than because they opposed the ideological tenets of fascism *per se* (see chapter eight).

⁴⁸ Some historians, including Eric Hobsbawm, have argued that Franco was not a fascist. Perhaps not, but he was supported by Europe's two most powerful fascist states as well as a considerable indigenous fascist element. He was as antagonistic to the left as any fascist: what difference did it make to a left wing activist about to be executed by Franco's followers that the *generalissimo* did not subscribe to every aspect of fascist ideology?

E. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991* (Michael Joseph, 1994) p156

⁴⁹ *North Mail*, 29/9/37, p7 and R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933-39* (Constable, 1980) pp262-4

provided consistent public support for Franco throughout the period.⁵⁰ Sir Nicholas Grattan-Doyle (Newcastle North) was another Conservative Catholic MP who openly supported Franco.⁵¹ The Marquess of Londonderry and his wife, important figures in north east Conservative circles, had strong pro-Nazi and Franco sympathies.⁵²

Ostensibly, Tom Magnay MP (National Liberal, Gateshead) opposed fascism. In October 1936 he said: 'We will have no truck whatever with the Fascists of the right or the Communists of the left. The Fascists [...] are marching the funeral cortege of democracy and British freedom'.⁵³ However, opposition to fascism in Britain did not necessarily equate with opposition to fascism abroad. Magnay sent a message of support to the *Anglo-German Review*, a consistently pro-Nazi publication. Sir Robert Aske MP (National Liberal, Newcastle East) openly supported Franco.⁵⁴

The majority of National Government figures in the region merely voiced loyal support of all facets of their government's foreign policy. The Spanish non-intervention agreement and the government's attitude towards the Spanish conflict did not provoke overt opposition, such as that of the Conservative Duchess of Atholl.⁵⁵ In general, north east government supporters who recognised that there was a deterioration in the international situation did not criticise their government over it.⁵⁶ When Eden resigned, there was general support for Chamberlain's stance.⁵⁷ This support for government foreign policy did not noticeably alter during or after the Munich crisis.⁵⁸

It was not until 1939 that there was any indication of differences of opinion over government foreign policy within north east Conservative organisations. At the half-yearly

⁵⁰ *Sunday Sun*, 30/8/36, p11; *North Mail*, 31/8/36, p5; 25/11/37, p6; *Blaydon Courier*, 5/9/36, p7; *Newcastle Journal*, 12/12/36, p5; 31/12/36, p4; Parliamentary Debates, Vol.316,c.125-128, 29/10/36; Vol.321,c.1617, 15/3/37; Vol.327,c.98, 21/10/37 and S. Haxey, *Tory MP* (Left Book Club, Gollancz, 1939) pp215-217
Irene Ward MP (Wallsend) visited Germany in April 1936.

N.J. Crowson, op cit., p21

⁵¹ *North Mail*, 19/10/37, p5; 16/10/37, p7; 3/3/38, p1 and Parliamentary Debates, Vol.318,c.5-6, 23/11/36
Grattan-Doyle had defended Blackshirt violence in 1934.

N. Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts* (Bewick Press, Whitley Bay, 1995) p33

⁵² *Sunderland Echo*, 10/9/36, p10; *Sunday Sun*, 15/11/36, p5; S. Haxey, op cit., pp152 and 215; N.J. Crowson, op cit., p25; N. Todd, op cit., pp29-33 and A. De Courcey, *Circe. The Life of Edith, Marchioness of Londonderry* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992) pp268-271

⁵³ *North Mail*, 23/10/36, p7

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5/12/38, p5 and S. Haxey, op cit., p206

⁵⁵ *Newcastle Journal*, 16/2/37, p9; *Shields News*, 13/3/37, p3 and *Shields Gazette*, 6/8/38, p1

For more on the so-called 'Red Duchess', see chapter eight.

⁵⁶ *Blaydon Courier*, 13/3/37, p9

⁵⁷ *North Mail*, 4/3/38, p11; 28/2/38, p5; *Durham Chronicle*, 15/4/38, p6; 12/9/38, p6; *Shields Gazette*, 16/11/38, p3 and 7/3/38, p5

⁵⁸ *Sunday Sun*, 9/10/38, p11; 16/10/38, p5; 16/4/39, p15; *Durham Chronicle*, 30/9/38, p2; 21/10/38, p6; 4/11/38, p4; *Blaydon Courier*, 4/11/38, p8; 23/12/38, p1; 31/3/39, p5; 4/5/39, p5; *North Mail*, 3/3/39, p9; 13/3/39, p5; 25/3/39, p5; 29/4/39, p1; 3/5/39, p6; *Shields Gazette*, 16/12/38, p11; 19/1/39, p2; 20/5/39, p1 and *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 14/4/39, p2

meeting of the Northern Area Council of Conservative Associations in 1939, there was a small controversy over foreign policy. A motion supporting government foreign policy was accepted unanimously but an amendment provoked division. The amendment, proposed by Lady Rebe Bradford (chairperson of the Women's Advisory Committee), deplored the Eden and Churchill agitation (on foreign policy). There were cries of 'no' when Churchill was mentioned specifically. Cuthbert Headlam, an important north east Conservative, said that Bradford should not mention the 'two distinguished men by name' and added that the discussion had revealed division when unity was necessary to win the next election.⁵⁹ Bradford then withdrew her amendment. It is difficult to determine what this reveals about Conservative attitudes. Obviously, loyalty to Chamberlain was paramount, but there was also an element of support for Churchill (though not, it seemed, for Eden). However, even if support for Churchill was due to his anti-Hitler stance at this time (and this is not made clear in the report) this still does not mean that there was any support for a popular front against Chamberlain.⁶⁰

There were two north east National Government MPs (both Conservative) who appeared to be foreign policy rebels: Colonel Bernard Cruddas (Wansbeck) and Samuel Storey (Sunderland). Cruddas' initial response to the situation in Spain was hardly that of a rebel, however. Stating, in October 1936, that his sympathies lay with Franco, he noted that whilst some said that the Spanish government should be removed constitutionally it was 'difficult to wait when friends were being murdered'.⁶¹ Yet Cruddas soon revealed that he was not afraid to contradict other Conservatives publicly on foreign policy issues. At a Conservative meeting in Newcastle in November 1936, Cruddas disagreed with Somerset de Chair MP (S.W. Norfolk), who was pro-isolation. Cruddas stressed the importance of backing France in a crisis, although he was opposed to a pact with Russia. Supposing, Cruddas asked, there was a war; 'are we going to allow France to be overwhelmed [...]?' I do not think we can because I

⁵⁹ *Sunday Sun*, 16/7/39, p5

Headlam thought the meeting 'went off all right', though the amendment 'aroused a good deal of discussion'. Headlam himself disliked both the 'distinguished men' in question and could not understand why they should be included in the cabinet.

Headlam Diary, 15/7/39 (DRO, D/HE/35)

⁶⁰ No Conservative organisation in the region appeared to be a critic of Chamberlain's foreign policy. Tynemouth Conservative Association consistently expressed its satisfaction with government foreign policy. Tynemouth Conservative Association, ARs 1937, 1938 and 1939; EC Minutes, 25/3/38, 30/9/38 (TWAS, 1633/1 and 1633/2)

There was nothing of relevance in the Northumberland County Conservative records except for a resolution passed in 1940 praising Chamberlain, suggesting that there was no opposition to him before this time. Northumberland County members of Northern Counties Provincial Area Council of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations Minutes, 9/3/40 (NRON, 4137/1)

⁶¹ *Newcastle Journal*, 12/10/36, p4

Cruddas seldom commented on the Spanish situation.

think we should be next'.⁶² Cruddas also seemed to be less antagonistic towards Russia than many other Conservatives. In December 1936 he pointed out that 'Russia did not want to expand, but Germany did' and argued for Britain to link with France, Holland and Scandinavian countries, with each contributing to an international police force.⁶³ The crisis surrounding Eden's resignation almost made Cruddas a rebel. Labour proposed a motion of censure of the government over the resignation. The *North Mail* reported that seventeen Conservative MPs would have expressed their disagreement with the government if they had been able to vote on an amendment accepting the first part but omitting the second part of the censure motion. As a vote was not allowed on the amendment, the Conservative 'rebels', who included Harold Macmillan, decided to abstain. However, five of the seventeen supposed rebels, including Cruddas, actually voted with the government.⁶⁴

This brief and somewhat feeble flirtation with rebellion seems to have been the only one. Cruddas did not seem to feel that the international situation was particularly serious making him less likely to rebel against his party. In April 1938, he sounded anything but a rebel: he thought that there was a definite danger that France would try to get Britain into war in order to 'down' Germany. Britain should continue non-intervention in Spain as Spaniards would not be helped if they were sent arms that Britain needed. China, he mused, 'always had a wonderful capacity for passive resistance and I think we can look upon that situation a little more cheerfully'.⁶⁵ Germany, in occupying Austria, had 'done the right thing, but [...] in the wrong way'.⁶⁶ He also supported the 'very wise' negotiations with Italy.⁶⁷ Chamberlain had 'gone from strength to strength' as far as Cruddas was concerned.⁶⁸ He disagreed with Chamberlain only when he claimed that there were no winners in war. Cruddas thought that whilst there may not be winners there was definitely one loser, which was Germany, whose people still did not have enough to eat. Overall, Cruddas thought that the 'outlook is better'.⁶⁹ Cruddas loyally supported his party in the Commons vote on the government's handling of the Munich crisis on October 6, 1938.⁷⁰ By February 1939, Cruddas seemed resigned to war, which, he thought, would not be as bad as some scaremongers claimed. 'Try to help to put

⁶² *Sunday Sun*, 15/11/36, p13 and *North Mail*, 16/11/36, p5

⁶³ *North Mail*, 9/12/36, p4 and *Shields Gazette*, 9/12/36, p7

⁶⁴ Parliamentary Debates, Vol.332,c.324, 22/2/38; *North Mail*, 23/2/38, p3 and 24/2/38, p5

⁶⁵ *Blyth News*, 4/4/38, p1

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁰ Parliamentary Debates, Vol.339,c.557-60, 6/10/38

away', he advised his audience, 'these stories that we are going to be bombed to pieces'.⁷¹

Two months later, his ability to analyse the international situation was at an all-time low. He said: 'It is quite possible there may be a war, or there may not, but we have to carry on as usual'.⁷² Cruddas found himself 'more cheerful' about the international situation at the end of the month.⁷³

The circumstances surrounding Eden's resignation provoked protest in Parliament from another north east MP. Whilst Cruddas backed down and voted with the government against Labour's censure motion, it is possible that Samuel Storey abstained.⁷⁴ In mid-March 1938, Storey announced his intention to register a protest by abstaining from voting for government moves to organise talks with Italy, although he 'only wanted to be proved wrong'.⁷⁵ In November 1938, Storey, along with Macmillan, Churchill and Eden abstained from voting on the debate on the Anglo-Italian agreement.⁷⁶ Yet Storey was displeased with only one element of the government's foreign policy; its attempts at promoting good relations with Mussolini. Like Cruddas, he supported the government in the crucial vote on Munich in early October 1938.⁷⁷ Thus it is not surprising that he made no remarks in favour of some kind of electoral understanding with opposition parties, nor did he criticise Chamberlain on the public platform. These two were the only government MPs who appeared even slightly rebellious on their government's foreign policy in the north east.

The discussion of National Government supporters' attitudes above is unavoidably based on their public pronouncements and behaviour in Parliament. If anything, their loyalty in public to their party and government was a stronger motivating force than for their Labour counterparts, so it is unlikely that there would be evidence of open dissent. However, one of the most important and influential north east Conservatives, Cuthbert Headlam, left a diary. This allows the historian to compare his public pronouncements with his private thoughts. Headlam had a national significance too: Nigel Crowson argued that he represented

⁷¹ *North Mail*, 7/2/39, p7

⁷² *Ibid.*, 13/4/39, p7

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 27/4/39, p7

⁷⁴ Storey's name did not appear as having voted on the motion, although it is possible he was paired. There is no way of being sure: the *Times* often carried lists of the names of paired MPs but it did not do so for this vote. Moreover, his name was not mentioned in the local newspaper report on the possible Conservative rebels from the north east.

Parliamentary Debates, Vol.332,c.326, 22/2/38; *North Mail*, 23/2/38, p3; 24/2/38, p5 and *Times*, 23/2/38 pp7-9 Storey had previously spoken out in Parliament against parts of the governments' Special Areas Bill.

Parliamentary Debates, Vol.317,c.1664-6, 17/11/36

⁷⁵ *North Mail*, 16/3/38, p7

⁷⁶ Cruddas voted with his party. It is certain that Storey abstained on this occasion as the press report was explicit on this point.

Parliamentary Debates, Vol.340,c.333, 2/11/38 and *North Mail*, 3/11/38, p9

⁷⁷ Parliamentary Debates, Vol.339,c.557-60, 6/10/38 and 'Gracchus', *Your MP* (Gollancz, 1944) p107

mainstream Conservative opinion.⁷⁸ Thus Headlam's attitude can be taken to represent that of many Conservatives in the region, as well as Britain as a whole.

Headlam had a slightly contradictory attitude towards fascism. In February 1934 he speculated in his diary that, in the event of a Labour victory at the ensuing general election 'many of us might well fall in with a fascist *coup d'état*, preferring a bourgeois revolution to a proletarian one'.⁷⁹ In September 1936 he warned publicly that fascism might come if 'we found that the socialists were hob-nobbing and making up with the Communists. Then [...] it was quite possible that some of the people might conceive that of the two dangers it would be better to have fascism'.⁸⁰ Overall though, Headlam thought that fascism was unlikely in Britain due to its 'intelligent working class' and a very strong body of Conservative and Liberal opinion that did not favour fascism.⁸¹ Both fascism and communism were unacceptable as both were 'despotism' and the English 'believe in liberty of the subject and complete democratic government in which all of us have a share'.⁸² Headlam appeared, now, to be relatively anti-fascist as he depicted fascism as the 'end of everything we value in life; the end of our freedom'.⁸³ It is, of course, conceivable that he would have become more favourable to fascism had Communist unity with Labour occurred.

Like Magnay, Headlam's opposition to, or at least non-support of, fascism in Britain did not necessarily mean opposition to fascists abroad. Headlam supported 'neutrality' in Spain.⁸⁴ In November 1937, this was taken to the extent of arguing that Britain should recognise Franco 'in order to avoid [...] being accused of having taken sides'.⁸⁵ By mid-1938 Headlam's 'neutrality' stretched to defending Franco attacks on British shipping which were 'a perfectly legitimate form of target for General Franco's bombs'.⁸⁶ Headlam's attitude towards Spain was no less pro-Franco in private. He thought that the popular British image of Franco as a ruthless military adventurer and the Republican government as similar to a British Liberal government were due to ignorance of foreign politics. Britain's best hope of detaching

⁷⁸ N.J. Crowson, *op cit.*, p20-1

⁷⁹ Headlam Diary, 13/2/34 (DRO, D/HE/30)

⁸⁰ *Shields News*, 10/9/36, p3

⁸¹ *Ibid.*,

As noted above though, some north east Conservatives did favour some types of fascism.

⁸² *Ibid.*,

⁸³ *Ibid.*,

⁸⁴ *Shields News*, 10/9/36, p3 and *North Mail*, 3/12/36, p7

⁸⁵ *North Mail*, 30/11/37, p5

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 10/6/38, p3

Clifton Brown MP (Hexham) disagreed with Headlam's comment. He was 'disturbed' by the bombing of British ships that were legitimately trading in Spanish waters, although he deplored the practice of ships taking the British flag.

Ibid., 11/6/38, p9

Mussolini and Hitler from Franco was, he thought, by supplying Spain with financial assistance.⁸⁷

However, Headlam's private feelings and public utterances differed more in the case of Nazi Germany. In September 1936 he wrote that Britain should give no colonies to Hitler. His visit to Germany in September 1937 revealed Hitler's apparent popular support, but it also convinced Headlam that the Nazis desired further territory and that they would fight to get it if necessary. The trip left Headlam feeling that Britain should attempt to get on friendly terms with Germany but also prepare for war.⁸⁸ Publicly, Headlam advocated agreement with Germany and admitted Hitler's popularity. Speaking in January 1938 he said: 'A dictatorship-controlled country may not be of liking to the Englishman, but it had to be realised that a dictator represented the views of his people'.⁸⁹ He then echoed a point he had made previously about the need to cease criticising other governments as a first step to peace.⁹⁰ When Eden resigned, Headlam supported Chamberlain, feeling that only talks with Mussolini would secure peace.⁹¹

Headlam's diary at the time of Munich reflects the confusion within and without Conservative Party ranks. However, the Munich crisis did not persuade Headlam that the government's foreign policy was fundamentally flawed. Crucial to Headlam's response was that, whilst he expressed some surprise at Chamberlain's 'surrender', he attributed this to Britain not being ready to fight a war. At no point did Headlam actually blame Chamberlain for anything that occurred up to and during Munich. On 9 October he blamed 'Baldwin, Macdonald, Simon, Hoare, Eden and co.'; in fact everyone who had been involved in national government foreign affairs before Chamberlain. Of these, Baldwin was the 'real villain'.⁹² Publicly he supported the Munich settlement, claiming that Chamberlain had saved the peace. He argued that, though Hitler was not to be trusted, appeasement 'was the right policy five years ago [...] the folly on our part is that we did not try it long ago'.⁹³ Privately, Headlam was sceptical of the claims of 'peace in our time', as he did not trust Hitler's word.⁹⁴ Though he thought Chamberlain 'too optimistic', he still thought Labour was the 'ass'.⁹⁵ In April 1939 he again expressed anger at the humiliating international situation but his belief in where the blame

⁸⁷ Headlam Diary, 10/4/38 and 18/1/39 (DRO, D/HE/34 and D/HE/35)

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 11/9/36, 7, 8, 10 and 12/9/37 (DRO, D/HE/32 and D/HE/33)

⁸⁹ *North Mail*, 8/1/38, p7 and *Shields Gazette*, 8/1/38, p5

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, and *North Mail*, 12/11/37, p7

⁹¹ *North Mail*, 23/2/38, p7

⁹² Headlam Diary, 9/10/38 (DRO, D/HE/34)

⁹³ *Shields Gazette*, 10/12/38, p10

⁹⁴ Headlam Diary, 19, 25, 26, 29, 30/9/38, 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 17/10/38 (DRO, D/HE/34)

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3/10/38 (DRO, D/HE/34)

lay had not changed.⁹⁶ A month earlier, Headlam became one of very few Conservatives, and unique the north east, to explicitly condemn the popular front. In an address to Alnwick Conservatives, he warned against the popular front 'which had ruined France for the time being and had brought disaster to Spain'.⁹⁷

Headlam moved from almost a pro-fascist stance in 1936 to anti-Nazism soon after (though he remained a Franco supporter). Yet this did not lead him to adopt a critique of government foreign policy, as he blamed all Chamberlain's predecessors for the problems Britain faced. Headlam's attitude was important due to his influence in the north east. If evidence of at least a critique of Chamberlain had been found in his private writings, it could have been argued that he, and many like him, were potential popular front supporters. As this was not the case, the conclusion must be that there were very few Conservative foreign policy dissidents and therefore potential popular front supporters in the region. The most likely potential popular fronter in the north east was the slightly rebellious Storey who, like other Conservative dissidents such as Churchill, abstained or voted against the government on some foreign policy questions. None of these figures, apart from the very brief flirtation with a Labour amendment at the time of Munich, ever looked likely to support a popular front. There is no strong evidence suggesting that any other north east Conservative figures were more favourable to the popular front than Storey.

Thus, the evidence reveals no obvious support outside of the labour movement for the popular front. Very few north east individuals criticised their government's foreign policy. Of the few that were critical, there is no evidence that positively links them with the popular front. In fact, several north east Conservatives were not even anti-fascist, as they revealed varying degrees of support for Nazi Germany and Franco in Spain. The attitudes of members of the National Government parties require no detailed explanation. They were merely supporting their party's policy, with greater or lesser fervour. Evidence of dissent would have been instructive had it been uncovered, but it was always unlikely. The picture of dissent being limited to a handful of government MPs who themselves saw the issues in different ways, adopted different attitudes to 'rebellion' and none of whom combined effectively with the opposition parties, is not modified by the case of the north east. However, meetings that gave an impression of a popular front did continue to be held into 1939, even after the failure of Cripps' campaign. In May 1939 there was a Congress of Peace and Friendship with Russia meeting held at Newcastle. Of the 200 plus delegates, there were many from both the 'official'

⁹⁶ Ibid., 8/4/39 (DRO, D/HE/35)

⁹⁷ *Newcastle Journal*, 3/3/39, p14

and 'unofficial' labour movement including representatives of local Labour Parties, miners' lodges, LBC branches, Co-op Guilds, the International Friendship League and Communist organisations. The presence of CAPR and LNU delegates and a clergyman speaker gave the impression of a popular front. As with the TJPC meeting of previous years, though, the Liberal side was only represented by the CAPR and LNU and there was no obvious Conservative in sight.⁹⁸ This chapter has been concerned with involvement in specific popular front campaigns and with the overt attitudes of Liberals and Conservatives. Both Liberals and Conservatives were involved in some of the north east 'Aid Spain' campaigns. This involvement, and its political implications, are discussed in the following chapter.

⁹⁸ *Sunday Sun*, 21/5/39, p7

The same can be said of a slightly earlier popular front meeting. Enid Atkinson (CAPR) replaced Vernon Bartlett (the 'popular front' MP of Bridgwater) who could not attend. *North Mail*, 17/4/39, p6 and 18/4/39, p1

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Tyneside Foodship Campaign, 1938-1939: A De Facto Popular Front?

The formal popular front campaigns in the north east in 1938 and 1939 drew very little support from any of the supposedly interested parties. However, it is possible that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, which involved people from a wide variety of different social and political backgrounds, constituted something like an unofficial popular front. Thus, as Jim Fyrth claimed; 'The Aid for Spain Campaign was the nearest thing to a People's Front that came about in Britain'.¹ The region saw a great deal of activity in several different 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Chapters one and four have already discussed some of the north east Spanish Medical Aid Committees (SMAC). In addition, there was a campaign to support a hostel for Basque refugee children in Tynemouth. The children had come to Britain after the Franco offensive on Euskadi between April and August 1937 produced large numbers of civilian refugees. The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR), an umbrella body formed to co-ordinate 'Aid Spain' activity, helped organise the housing of 4,000 refugee Basque children in Britain. In order to broaden the campaign, the Basque Children's Committee (BCC) was formed, in early May 1937, from the NJCSR and the Salvation Army, TUC, Quakers and the Catholic Church.

There was also a campaign to defend the *Linaria* crewmen. On 23 February 1937, the crew of the SS *Linaria*, all from the north east, refused to take a cargo of nitrates from Boston (Massachusetts) to Seville, as the port was Franco-held and they thought that the cargo would be used for making explosives. The campaign emerged to help defend the men in court after they left the ship and were deported from America. The CP, which organised volunteers to fight for the Republic in the International Brigades (IB), ran a campaign to support the volunteers and their dependants. In the final months of the conflict, there was an effort to organise foodships for the Republic throughout Britain. The Tyneside foodship was one of them. Of all these campaigns, the Tyneside foodship campaign was the widest reaching and most co-ordinated activity that occurred in the region ostensibly in aid of the Spanish Republic.

¹ J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1986) p22

Fyrth preferred the term 'People's Front', but it is synonymous with popular front. Orwell wrote that Communists preferred this title as it gave the popular front 'a spuriously democratic appeal'.

J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p6 and 'Spilling the Spanish Beans' in G. Orwell, *Orwell in Spain* (Penguin, 2001) p217

The term 'popular front' was also unfortunate as it allowed critics such as J. Henderson to deem it an 'unpopular front' (with, as has been seen, justification in the north east).

It is thus logical to choose this campaign as a case study with which to assess the proposition that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns constituted a de facto popular front. Most of the arguments regarding the Tyneside foodship and the popular front can be applied to other 'Aid Spain' campaigns. The differences between the campaigns are discussed briefly at the end of this chapter.

The Success of the Tyneside Foodship Campaign, December 1938-April 1939

The Tyneside foodship campaign began in early December 1938, as a response to the refugee crisis in Republican Spain engendered by the increasing loss of territory to Franco's forces.² The Tyneside foodship was the fourth from Britain. By late January 1939, ships had already gone from London, Merseyside and Yorkshire (and there were a further 17 in preparation). The initial appeal aimed at sending 300 tons of food (costing £3,000) on a ship in January.³ The campaign circularised 5,000 different organisations and individuals in the area including Labour Parties, trade unions, Co-operative Societies, LNU branches, socialist societies, churches and others. Eight hundred professional people were also approached.⁴ By 19 December the Tyneside foodship Committee, which had its central co-ordinating office in Newcastle, had 57 sub-committees dotted throughout Durham and Northumberland. This figure peaked at 120 in the first week of February.⁵ Many more towns and villages saw activity in this campaign than had occurred before in the form of SMACs and other 'Aid Spain' campaigns.

A month after it began, the campaign had raised £850 in goods and money and this included the contributions of very few sub-committees. A meeting in Newcastle City Hall on 22 January to be addressed by the Duchess of Atholl was changed to make it a 'food for Spain' meeting.⁶ The collection at the meeting amounted to £191, making a new total of £1,375 cash in hand. The campaign was given a boost by the arrival of the International Brigade (IB) convoy, which had been touring the country in support of the Spanish Republic.⁷ Due to the urgent need, it was decided not to wait until a ship could be found to sail from the Tyne but,

Blaydon Courier, 13/5/38, p5

² The question of sending a food and medical supply ship from the Tyne (apart from the British Youth Foodships) was first discussed in the north east in June 1938 at a joint NEFTC and NTFLP conference. Some spoke against it and nothing more seems to have occurred.

North Mail, 20/6/38, p7

³ *North Mail*, 6/12/38, p9 and *Shields Gazette*, 12/12/38, p1

⁴ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/38, p1 and *Spanish Relief*, 12/38 (bulletin of the NJCSR) (MML, BoxB-7B/5)

⁵ NJCSR letter, n.d. (MML Box B-7 B/4), *North Mail*, 19/12/38, p9; 3/1/39, p5; 19/1/39, p7; 6/2/39, p6 and *Shields Gazette*, 3/1/39, p1

⁶ Atholl was a strong Conservative campaigner on Spain. See Duchess of Atholl, *Searchlight on Spain* (Penguin, 1938)

⁷ *North Mail*, 12/1/39, p6; 23/1/39, p5; 26/1/39, p7; 27/1/39, p7; *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p7 and undated newspaper article (MML, BoxB-7B/30)

instead, to transport the food from the Humber. The SS *Frevadore* departed in early February 1939 carrying a total of £3,450 worth of goods, of which £3,031 had been raised in the north east.⁸ The ship arrived safely in Valencia in early March.

Undaunted by the fall of Catalonia to Franco, the committee announced its intention to send a second foodship at the end of February. There was £500 worth of food left after sending the first foodship. In mid-March, a lorry carrying three tons of food valued at £150 left Newcastle for London where it was loaded onto the SS *Stancroft*. A further £1000 was held for another week or two to be used to finance a second ship from the Tyne or Humber. However, it seems that there was no second Tyneside foodship: there was no reference in the sources to it after mid-March 1939. The original intention had been to end the campaign on 31 March. However, by the end of March all Republican resistance had ended and Spain now belonged to Franco.⁹ By June 1939, the Tyneside foodship campaign had become the Tyneside and District Spanish Refugee Ship committee, helping Spanish refugees start new lives in Mexico.¹⁰

Though there was some opposition to the foodship, there can be little doubt that the campaign was very successful. *Spanish Relief* noted that Tyneside was a 'particularly well-run' campaign, describing the £4,500 raised as a great deal from a depressed area.¹¹ The Duchess of Atholl had not heard of a 'parallel number of committees' anywhere else in the country (Tyneside had 110 at the time).¹² The first foodship was described as 'one of the North's greatest efforts'.¹³ The same report noted that those who had least to give still did so, including children and miner's wives. Some contemporaries agreed. The response to collectors for Spain was, Len Edmondson said, 'generally very good [...] people didn't have a lot but could afford to give us something'.¹⁴ Jack Lawther, highlighting the prevalent poverty, claimed that 'people generally gave as much as they could afford, or more than they could afford, in many cases'.¹⁵ The high level of activity around the Tyneside foodship (there was far less around the subsequent refugee ship campaign) and the total amount raised suggests that the cause was a popular one. But did it constitute something close to a popular front?

⁸ The NJCSR contributed the remainder.

North Mail, 28/1/39, p9; 6/2/39, p7; *Newcastle Journal*, 3/3/39, p14; *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 17/2/39, p2; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 2/39, p2 and *Sunday Sun*, 22/1/39, p13

⁹ *North Mail*, 6/2/39, p6; 3/3/39, p8; 30/3/39, p1 and *Shields Gazette*, 6/2/39, p1

¹⁰ *North Mail*, 24/6/39, p6; *Shields Gazette*, 20/6/39, p4 and undated leaflet (MML, BoxB-1/C20)

¹¹ *Spanish Relief*, 3/39 (MML, BoxB-7B/6)

¹² *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p2

¹³ *North Mail*, 23/1/39, p5

¹⁴ Len Edmondson Interview, 4/11/94

The Social and Political Diversity of Those Involved

It can be stated unequivocally that the Tyneside foodship campaign did look like a popular front in terms of those involved at the different levels. In the first place, the impetus for sending a foodship came from the popular front organisation, the TJPC. At a TJPC conference in Gateshead on 29 October 1938, one of the commissions established to consider methods of raising material assistance for China and Spain was instructed to give special attention to the question of organising a Tyneside foodship. The question was discussed at the 'Food and Freedom' conference in London on 12 and 13 November with the TJPC sponsoring the movement in the north east.¹⁶

In mid-November 1938 there was 'wide support' on Tyneside for the project which included many 'prominent figures' from trades union, religious bodies and 'progressive movements'.¹⁷ There was undoubtedly great political diversity amongst the patrons of the Tyneside foodship campaign. The two presidents were the very dissimilar figures of Viscount Ridley and C.P. Trevelyan.¹⁸ The patrons included local businessmen, ministers, Labour MPs Joshua Ritson and Ellen Wilkinson, the Liberal MP Wilfred Roberts (for North Cumberland) other unnamed MPs, trade union officials including Will Lawther and Labour alderman White of Gateshead, the mayors of Newcastle, Gateshead, South Shields and Sunderland, the lord mayor of Newcastle and other prominent people in the area.¹⁹ Another patron, Dr. H.P. Mulholland, was possibly a CAPR member.²⁰ Many of these people were involved in the only large public meeting that the campaign held. 'Every shade of political opinion' was represented

¹⁵ Jack Lawther Interview, 24/10/94

¹⁶ This was the very poorly attended conference. Fortunately for the success of the Tyneside foodship campaign, the conference was not a portent of things to come.

Sunday Sun, 30/10/38, p13; *North Mail*, 31/10/38, p7; 14/11/38, p7 and NMA AR 1938, 18/10/38 (NROM, 759/68)

A leaflet on the conference did not reveal the names of any north east delegates. (MML, BoxB-7B/4a)

¹⁷ *North Mail*, 14/11/38, p7

¹⁸ The Ridley family had been powerful in the north east for three centuries. In the seventeen and eighteenth centuries it built up interests in Newcastle mercantile life and held a Parliamentary seat for the Conservative Party in the city for several generations. Later, the family bought an estate in Northumberland and retained mixed economic interests in agricultural, mining and banking and a strong influence in Conservative circles in the region.

N. McCord, 'Some aspects of north east England in the nineteenth century, *Northern History*, Vol. 8 (1972) p79

¹⁹ Undated and untitled report on the foodship campaign, Newbiggin and North Seaton LLP Records (NRON, 1587/10); *Shields Gazette*, 12/12/38, p1; *Newcastle Journal*, 12/12/38, p6; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/38, p1 and *Spanish Relief*, 12/38 (MML, BoxB-7B/5)

²⁰ Mulholland had certainly been involved in TJPC and CAPR organised events from 1937. He presided at a Tyneside peace week 'social' in June 1937, put his name to a CAPR manifesto against aerial bombing in January 1937, and signed, along with CAPR and TJPC members, letters calling for a Japanese boycott and in support of dockers refusing to load a ship for Japan in January 1938.

Newcastle Journal, 12/1/37, p9; *Sunday Sun*, 23/1/38, p5 and *North Mail*, 23/6/38, p6

at the meeting at Newcastle City Hall on 22 January.²¹ It was addressed by the Duchess of Atholl, Michael Weaver (Conservative PPC for Workington), William Whiteley MP (Labour, Blaydon), Frieda Bacon (CAPR) and Frank Graham (Communist and ex-International Brigade). David Adams MP (Labour, Consett) was also on the platform, along with Dr. Sydney Havelock, who was probably a LNU speaker and possibly a Liberal.²²

A list of names urging Wearsiders to support the foodship also gave the impression of a popular front. It included Frank Graham, two Independent councillors, the Labour mayor of Sunderland, Labour MP Joshua Ritson and Miss N. Ritson. There were also middle class professionals including five doctors and seven clergy one of whom had been an 'unofficial Moderate' candidate who stood unsuccessfully against another Moderate in 1937.²³ There were also two other 'notables', Captain Scott and Sir Luke Thompson, and several individuals.²⁴ This was true of the other foodships. Liverpool foodship patrons included the bishop and dean of Liverpool and a Conservative JP.²⁵ The Yorkshire foodship council had a long list of patrons including Conservative and Labour MPs, several bishops and other clergy as well as important figures such as J.B. Priestley.²⁶ Harwich foodship committee also involved people from political and non-political organisations.²⁷

Like the lists of patrons and supporters, the political affiliations and social class of the individuals in the central office suggested that the campaign was a de facto popular front. T.T. Anderson (junior) was the single most important figure, being the honorary secretary of the Tyneside and District Foodship for Spain Committee. He was a 'well known personality' in South Shields and 'a social worker of energy and ability'.²⁸ Anderson came from a middle class background. A grammar school teacher, he was apparently involved in a great deal of public work, both social and charitable. As mentioned in chapter one, the organising secretary, R.G.

²¹ *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p7

²² Havelock had signed the CAPR manifesto against bombing. He also spoke at a Tyneside peace week social in June 1937 under the LNU banner. A Sydney Havelock of Newcastle addressed a South Shields Liberal Association meeting on 'Manchuria, Abyssinia and Spain' in June 1937. *Shields Gazette*, 9/6/37, p1; *Newcastle Journal*, 12/1/37, p9; *North Mail*, 16/6/37, p7 and *Durham Chronicle*, 18/6/37, p4

²³ Frank Graham wrongly dated the appeal to some time in 1937.

F. Graham, *The Battle of Jarama* (Frank Graham, Newcastle, 1987) p34

²⁴ Three individuals listed had been involved in Sunderland SMAC. Of the three, Miss W.J.E. Moul (headmistress of Bede Collegiate School, Sunderland), at least, was likely to have had left sympathies. She corresponded with C.P. Trevelyan in November 1937 regarding a book she was researching on Hannah More the educationalist and women's movement activist.

W.J.E. Moul letters to C.P. Trevelyan, 4/11/37 and 16/11/37 (NRL, CPT152); *North Mail*, 2/2/37, p7 and *Evening Chronicle*, 2/2/37, p5

²⁵ J. Coward, *Back From the Dead* (Merseyside Writers, Liverpool, 1985) n.p.n.

²⁶ Woodcraft Folk Papers (BLPES, YMA/WF/204)

²⁷ J. Fyrth, op cit., p211

²⁸ *Shields Gazette*, 6/1/39, p6

Purcell, was chairperson of Newcastle NUGMW branch, TJPC secretary and secretary of Newcastle CAPR branch. Frieda Bacon, another central organiser, was also a CAPR member.²⁹

This diversity was also reflected in the composition of the sub-committees. Purcell claimed that the campaign incorporated a large number of religious, social and political organisations, and this is borne out by other evidence. Those co-operating in the collecting of food and funds on the left included Labour Parties, miners' lodges, other trade unions, Co-operative guilds, the NUWM and book club groups.³⁰ Ex-International Brigaders, who included many Communists, were prominent in the campaign. Enid Ramshaw, a Communist who had served in Spain as a nurse, spoke to Heaton Railway Women's Guild and made an appeal for the foodship.³¹ Contemporaries' comments largely corroborate this picture. Frank Graham recalled that 'nearly every progressive organisation was involved in collecting, including the Liberals'.³² Len Edmondson thought that Liberals were 'probably' involved in collecting 'as individuals'.³³ Charlie Woods, however, claimed that Liberals were not involved.³⁴ Certainly, the CAPR, an unorthodox liberal organisation was involved, as was the LNU, which included Liberals and Conservatives amongst its membership. Moreover, at least one identifiable Conservative was involved in the sub-committees. In addition, there was involvement from those who were generally considered 'non-political'. Members of the clergy actively supported the foodship in several areas.³⁵ Other ostensibly 'non-political' bodies were involved, such as women's sections of the British Legion and the Town's Womens' Guild. Corbridge boys club collected in their locality.³⁶

The actual composition and genesis of individual committees varied quite considerably. Some were far more diverse, and therefore more obviously like popular fronts than others. The

²⁹ *North Mail*, 24/1/39, p6; *Blaydon Courier*, 3/2/39, p4 and *Shields Gazette*, 17/12/38, p1

³⁰ *North Mail*, 19/12/38, p9; 12/1/39, p6; 31/1/39, pp1 and 5; 10/2/39, p5; *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 3/2/39 p2; *Hexham Courant*, 21/1/39, p7; *Tynedale Mirror*, 12/1/39, p4; 2/2/39, p3, *Sunday Sun*, 22/1/39, p13; Cambois Lodge Minutes, 11/12/38 (NROM, 3793/30) and Murton Labour Party letter, 3/2/39 (original in the possession of Ray Physick).

³¹ *Railway Review*, 17/2/39 p7 (WMRC, 127NU/4/1/27)

³² Frank Graham Interview, 21/10/94

³³ Len Edmondson Interview, 4/5/99

³⁴ Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4/M/1)

³⁵ Of course, some members of the clergy (other than Catholics) were overtly 'political'. As mentioned above, an 'unofficial Moderate' clergyman supported the Sunderland appeal for the foodship. A Rev. Lewis MacLachlan was chairperson of the CAPR's Northern Area Council.

North Mail, 22/7/37, p6

³⁶ *North Mail*, 19/12/38, p9; 10/1/39, p6; *Hexham Courant*, 14/1/39, p7; 21/1/39, p7; 28/1/39, p8 and *Sunday Sun*, 22/1/39, p13

Corbridge Boy's Club had been active for the Republic for some time. In July 1937 the club had helped recondition a motorcycle for the Republic. This suggests more than humanitarian commitment.

North Mail, 1/7/37, p7

Jarrow foodship committee was the most diverse. It was an all-party affair including the Labour mayor, a Labour councillor and the chairperson of Jarrow Conservative Association, C.V.H. Vincent. There were three clergymen of the Anglican and free churches in addition to the chair of Jarrow and Monkton Town's Women's Guild and other individuals. The secretary and several members of Jarrow committee were described as 'non-party'.³⁷

Those donating to the appeal were equally diverse in terms of class, political and religious affiliation, again suggesting a popular front. Donors to the Felling appeal included the Labour League of Youth (LLY) and Ex-Servicemen's Association branches, the Free Church Council, an Independent (which could have meant a Liberal or Conservative) councillor and Heworth miners' lodge.³⁸ Messages of support and donations to the South Shields foodship committee came from the South Shields Labour MP and both the Liberal and National Liberal PPCs. The Tyne Dock Town's Womens' Guild, unemployed people and children were all generous donors in the town.³⁹ Several Women's Institute groups (which could be deemed 'conservative' with a small, if not a capital, 'c') donated to the campaign.⁴⁰

How Was the Foodship Campaign Framed?

It is unsatisfactory to say that, as the Tyneside foodship and many of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns looked like popular fronts in action, that is what they must have been. It is necessary to attempt to determine *why* these people organised together; what, if anything, united them? The question of whether the conflict in Spain was seen in political or humanitarian terms by campaign participants is vital to our discussion. This presents a problem. Apart from those it has been possible to interview who can reveal how they perceived the political situation and why they participated in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns (and those interviewed were more likely to be those who were politically motivated in the first place), there is very little direct evidence. What can be observed, though, is how the campaign presented the conflict in its propaganda and inferences can be made from this.

The main organisers of the campaign consistently played down the politics of the conflict in Spain. In the initial appeal in early December 1938 a campaign organiser, G. Middleton, whilst conceding that the food was intended for 'women and children on Spanish government territory' to prevent famine, emphasised that the campaign had 'no political object'.⁴¹ This was reiterated elsewhere. Anderson, in a letter sent to many local papers,

³⁷ *Shields Gazette*, 13/1/39, p1; 17/1/39, p3; 30/1/39, p8 and *North Mail*, 13/1/39, p11

³⁸ *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 17/2/39, p2

³⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 6/1/39, p1; 21/1/39, p1; 3/2/39, p11 and *North Mail*, 23/1/39, p7

⁴⁰ They were Chopwell, Nedderton, West Rainton, Newbottle (Houghton) and Delves Lane (Consett). *Blaydon Courier*, 24/2/39, p3; 3/3/39, p3; *North Mail*, 11/1/39, p2; 17/1/39, p2 and 24/2/39, p2

⁴¹ *North Mail*, 6/12/38, p9

quoted from a League of Nations report on civilian suffering in Spain. The foodship would, he stated, 'relieve distress and acute hunger among the people of Republican Spain'.⁴² He stressed that the appeal was 'not based on political sympathy but upon the sheer fact of starvation'.⁴³ This political neutrality was made even more explicit in early January 1939. Anderson wrote: 'We are not concerned with the rights and wrongs of the present conflict in Spain'.⁴⁴ The sole purpose of the foodship was to relieve the suffering of innocent victims of the conflict, and in order to do this the help of those of all political and religious creeds was requested.

In mid-January 1939 Anderson responded in the press to recurrent questions which met foodship collectors on the doorstep. Two of the five questions he dealt with were directly concerned with the partisanship of the campaign. To refute the allegation that the aid was helping the Republic as it was going solely to Republican civilians, Anderson cited findings from the LNU Bray Webster report of October 1938. Republican territory was experiencing particular problems due to an influx of refugees from Nationalist Spain which had increased the population by 20%. Conditions in Nationalist Spain were entirely different. 'Surely' Anderson argued, 'it would be unreasonable to treat both sides alike when the needs are different [...]'.⁴⁵ A further charge was more serious: that those who donated to the foodship were in effect supporting the 'Communist' Republican government. Anderson did not deny that the foodship would help the Republic. Instead, he quoted several commentators who thought that the political system in Republican Spain was very similar to the British one. He added, curiously, that 'by showing the Russian people that there are hearts in Europe' the foodship would not help the Soviets anyway. It was merely to save lives.⁴⁶ In February Anderson claimed that the foodship campaign was 'not like an ordinary charity'.⁴⁷ However, this was not because this particular charity had a political impact. Rather, it was different because the situation in Spain was a 'very urgent and serious matter', thus 'people should give more often than they would to the ordinary charitable society'.⁴⁸ Another central figure, Purcell, also claimed the fund was 'purely humanitarian'.⁴⁹ After the departure of the first Tyneside foodship, Purcell said the committee hoped to send a second ship 'to carry succour to Spain's stricken people [...]', and added that 'Our efforts have shown that there exists a very large measure of sympathy and

⁴² *Shields Gazette*, 12/12/38, p1 and *Newcastle Journal*, 12/12/38, p6

⁴³ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁴ *Shields Gazette*, 3/1/39, p4

⁴⁵ *North Mail*, 19/1/39, p6 and *Shields Gazette*, 19/1/39, p4

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁷ *Shields Gazette*, 6/2/39, p1 and *North Mail*, 6/2/39, p6

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*,

⁴⁹ *Shields Gazette*, 22/1/39, p13

support for Spain [...]’ not mentioning the Republic.⁵⁰ The foodship was not in any way presented as a way of combating Franco and fascism by the central organisers of the campaign, who were clear that it was ‘non-political in aims’.⁵¹

The sub-committees followed the central committee in the way they framed the campaign. The only real difference was that some spoke of ending the starvation of the ‘Spanish people’ (presumably referring to those in the Republic, although it is uncertain whether they actually thought aid would go to both sides) whilst others were more explicit in specifying those in the Republican sector. Thus in Jarrow the appeal was to provide food ‘for women and children in the Government area in Spain’.⁵² In Felling, they ‘[...] decided to carry on until the needs of the Spanish people are satisfied’.⁵³ The Consett committee provided another example of the former, and the appeals in Chester-le-Street, Hexham, South Shields and Wearside were all examples of the latter.⁵⁴

The only sub-committee that partly erred from this non-political stance was Gateshead where the Labour Party seems to have been the driving force. An article on the front page of the Gateshead Labour Party paper urging support for the Tyneside foodship in December 1938 condemned the ‘criminal and farcical non-intervention’ and praised the IB volunteers and those who worked at home for humanitarian relief. Even here, though, politics was muted by humanitarianism. Beginning with the words ‘Women and children are starving in Spain’, the article concentrated on the humanitarian effort. Whilst humanitarian aid and IB members were equated by the writer, there was no real mention of the arms issue and how to alter government policy nor even of the need to combat fascism.⁵⁵

The only other evidence that counters the emphasis on the non-political, humanitarian basis of the campaign was provided by some of the speakers at the large foodship meeting in Newcastle. The main figure in this context was the Duchess of Atholl, who spoke at a delegate meeting of foodship volunteers and at a foodship public meeting in Newcastle, both on 22 January. Atholl’s utterances provide an interesting example of someone who knew that they should be representing the campaign as a humanitarian one, but who wanted to make it more political. Thus the overall message was a somewhat confusing one for the audience. At the delegate conference, Atholl said that the situation in Spain was ‘at once so acute an

⁵⁰ *North Mail*, 23/1/39, p5

⁵¹ *Ibid.*,

⁵² *Shields Gazette*, 17/1/39, p3

⁵³ *Heslop’s Local Advertiser*, 17/2/39, p2

⁵⁴ *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 30/12/38, p2; *Tynedale Mirror*, 12/1/39, p4; 2/2/39, p3; *Shields Gazette*, 23/12/38, p6; 30/12/38, p6; *Blaydon Courier*, 27/1/39, p4 and F. Graham, *op cit.*, p34

⁵⁵ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 12/38, p1

humanitarian problem [...] and at the same time of such tremendous political and strategic importance to ourselves'.⁵⁶ The Republic needed arms and food but 'we cannot send arms: only governments can do that'.⁵⁷ They could, however, relieve hunger and this would strengthen the determination of the Republic's fighters.⁵⁸ At the public meeting, Atholl again flitted between politics and humanitarianism. She began by saying, 'I cannot deal with the question of arms here; this is not a political meeting' and went on to thank God that in the face of all the suffering in Spain, 'we can do something to help by sending food'.⁵⁹ Yet she then began to sound more partisan with her claims that a foodship 'can do nothing better to assist the morale of the men who are making such a magnificent stand against such overwhelming odds'.⁶⁰ Presumably in order not to alienate the Catholics, she referred to the Pope, who had donated £1000 to a French Catholic committee for Spanish relief. More partisan comments followed as Atholl remarked that Republican soldiers were worthy of what Napoleon had said of British soldiers: 'That they were bad soldiers because they did not know when they were beaten'.⁶¹ Thus, there was some politics at these two foodship meetings, although this was confused, deliberately in the case of Atholl, with humanitarianism.

Due to the relatively poor reporting of political meetings at this time, it is difficult to assess who else other than the Duchess of Atholl brought politics, in the form of pro-Republic rhetoric, to the platform. Frank Graham did (though he did not mention the arms question) but this is known only because the draft of a speech he gave has survived. Of course, the very presence of an IB fighter suggests partisanship and politics, though it could have been argued that such a person was speaking purely because they had seen the humanitarian suffering first hand. Also, Graham's foodship speech was very toned down politically compared to another speech which he gave to a Labour organised 'Save Spain' meeting in Sunderland a few days later.⁶²

⁵⁶ *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p2

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 23/1/39, p2

⁵⁸ This was one reason why the foodships were partly military assistance. In addition, the foodships must have helped the war effort in other indirect ways, presumably having a positive effect on the morale of non-combatants as well as allowing more food to go to soldiers at the front, and so forth. This was claimed by First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Alfred Duff Cooper in the House of Commons in July 1937. In response to a request to allow the Royal Navy to rescue refugees from northern Spain he said: '[...] when a town is beleaguered, besieged, help given to a beleaguered garrison either in the way of importing food or in the way of diminishing the demand for food - that is taking away the women and children - is military assistance'. The Republic still desperately needed arms to win, though.

Parliamentary Debates, Vol.326,c.2575, 22/7/37

⁵⁹ *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p7

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*,

⁶¹ *Ibid.*,

⁶² The second of the three speeches in the collection was more political, but it is uncertain to whom it was addressed.

It is quite conceivable that other speakers brought in for the public meeting also talked of the campaign in political terms to a greater or lesser extent, although it cannot be proven. What is clear is that outside of this one large public meeting and the delegate conference, all of the day-to-day organisers of the Tyneside foodship campaign steered clear of politics, whether for tactical or ideological reasons. Thus whilst it would be wrong to state that the message given in the press and on public platforms was that the Tyneside foodship was non-political and humanitarian without exception, it is clear that the somewhat mixed and confusing comments of the Duchess of Atholl and perhaps one or two other speakers, were exceptional, and that the non-political humanitarian message of the campaign was the one that must have had most impact on the populace. The repeated statements of all the main foodship organisers at central and sub-committee level to the effect that the campaign was non-political easily outweighed the more political and partisan comments, albeit uttered by prominent figures.

Thus the foodship appeal was predominantly framed in terms of humanitarian aid to starving women and children, who happened to be in the Republican zone, by almost everyone involved and certainly those on the central committee. It was not presented as a way of combating Franco and fascism with the exceptions mentioned above. Of course, other commentators writing to regional newspapers did see the foodship as a means of supporting the Republic (democracy) against fascism (Franco). These people, though, were generally easily identifiable as Communists or other leftists, who already held these political views. Even then, the politics were sometimes muted. For example, an ex-IB member from South Shields, William Norris, writing of those who had fought (with two dying) in Spain from the area, supported the 'non-political' foodship claiming, somewhat cryptically, that 'Food for Spain now means freedom for Britain tomorrow'.⁶³ Implicit was the idea that a fascist victory in Spain would threaten Britain, but a person unfamiliar with the issue could be forgiven for interpreting the comment in a number of different ways.

The Tyneside foodship was not aberrant in framing a humanitarian appeal. A circular from the Eastern Counties Foodship Committee to sub-committees explained how they should establish the campaign: prominent local people 'of different vocations and points of view' should be approached for their support and then three or four of 'the most respected' should sign an appeal to the local press 'couched in humanitarian, not political terms'.⁶⁴ This was what occurred on Tyneside. In fact the Tyneside foodship campaign acted as a template for other

Notes for three Frank Graham speeches (MML, BoxA12/Gr/8) and bill advertising a 'Save Spain' meeting (MML, BoxB-4M/6)

⁶³ *Shields Gazette*, 23/12/38, p6 and 30/12/38, p6

⁶⁴ J. Fyrth, *op cit.*, p259

foodships. Its propaganda and 'very excellent publicity' served 'as a lead to many committees'.⁶⁵

The Implications of the Humanitarian Message

The popular front was a political project with political aims. In Britain these aims were an end to appeasement (either by forcing a change of policy from the present government or replacing it with a popular front government); the sale of arms to the Spanish Republic and an immediate pact with the democracies and Russia. If the Tyneside foodship campaign (and, by association, the foodship campaigns nation-wide), were a true popular front, it must be demonstrated that those from the right of the political spectrum and those from 'non-political' groups involved in the campaign subscribed to these popular front aims. In other words, they were acting, in their own minds and not just in effect, against fascism and for democracy. This was later implied by the Communist Charlie Woods, who wrote that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns 'clarified the ideas of ordinary people about the world threat of fascism'.⁶⁶ This is not to say that those involved in a popular front organisation or campaign should show evidence of embracing a Marxist analysis of the causes of fascism and war. It is not unreasonable, however, to expect evidence of a general desire to oppose fascism more forcefully and embrace a critique of appeasement. If this can be shown, a compelling case for the existence of an effective *de facto* popular front at grass roots level can be argued. The central committee and then sub-committees of the campaign will be examined in turn in order to establish whether they can be regarded as popular fronts.

Assessment of the extent to which the Tyneside foodship campaign's central committee can be regarded as a popular front is problematic as it is difficult to determine the attitudes and motivations of some of its members. Purcell provided the least problem in this respect. He was important in the TJPC, an anti-fascist, anti-Chamberlain popular front organisation, and a member of the CAPR many of whose members were involved in the TJPC and who also lent their support to the Cripps Petition in 1939. It seems reasonable to assume that his involvement in the Tyneside foodship campaign was due to him viewing a Franco victory in Spain as likely to make a wider war more probable and threaten democracy. But, there is no direct evidence of his attitude to Spain: Purcell only began to make public statements on Spain with his involvement in the Tyneside foodship campaign which, due to the decision to exclude politics from the campaign, meant he did not pronounce on it in a 'political' manner.⁶⁷ The

⁶⁵ NJCSR letter, n.d. (MML, BoxB-7B/4)

⁶⁶ Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4/M/1)

⁶⁷ If he was the 'R.S. Purcell' of Newcastle who supported the Middlesborough dockers in refusing to load a Japanese ship in November 1937, it makes it more likely that he was an anti-fascist. Though the Japanese

same can be said of Frieda Bacon, also of the CAPR, who had also been active in the TJPC and SDPC from 1936.

There is more evidence regarding T.T. Anderson's attitude and it suggests that he approached the issue with the same kind of motivations which led to his involvement in charity and social work. In other words, Anderson acted from humanitarian rather than political motives.⁶⁸ Anderson was from a conservative middle class background and the least 'political' of those in the central organisation. The only remotely political body he was associated with was the LNU.⁶⁹ This organisation attracted members from across the political spectrum who agreed on the desirability of the League of Nations but who were not united by a common or even broadly similar understanding of the international situation.⁷⁰ Anderson's motivations were informed by his involvement with Quakers. He was involved with the Quaker relief work in Spain from July 1937 as treasurer of a South Shields Society of Friends fund for Spain.⁷¹ There is also evidence that Anderson's concerns about the wider international situation at the time of the foodship campaign were framed through Quaker channels. In a letter to the *Shields Gazette*, Anderson reminded readers of the Friends Hall meeting to further the work in South Shields for a petition for a new peace conference.⁷² He also stressed the need to try and

regime was not actually fascist, it was seen as such by many British left wingers (see above footnote). *Sunday Sun*, 21/11/37, p3

⁶⁸ These humanitarian motives could sometimes work against left wing politics. Though ostensibly inoffensive and apolitical, social work involving Quakers and the middle class sometimes angered labour movement activists as it served (either intentionally or inadvertently) to diminish working class political dissent. A good example was activity around unemployment. Quakers and the National Council for Social Service (NCSS) helped the unemployed to obtain allotments and middle class volunteers were brought in to NCSS centres to help. The leader of the NUWM, Wal Hannington, was worried that these activities would divert the unemployed away from political protest and also produce food and goods that should be produced by workers at trade union rates.

R. Croucher, *We Refuse to Starve in Silence. A History of the National Unemployed Workers Movement, 1920-46* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1987) pp153-4

⁶⁹ Anderson did however chair a CAPR meeting on Spain in South Shields market place in July 1938. Thus it is conceivable that he was a CAPR member and more political than he seemed. This, however, was the only reference to him being involved in an overtly political organisation and was most likely an aberration. Alternatively, he may have been a pacifist involved in the CAPR. His pacifism/Quakerism would have permitted involvement in the CAPR. There were, of course, still pacifists in Labour Party ranks such as Ruth Dodds of Gateshead.

Shields Gazette, 25/7/38, p8; 6/1/39, p6 and *North Mail*, 25/7/38, p7

⁷⁰ Chapter three noted how the Catholic John Eppstein of the LNU national executive spoke openly against the Spanish Republic and in favour of Franco. The fact that the LNU was not necessarily anti-fascist was also revealed by the variety of people it invited to speak. For example, in October 1936 Consett LNU held a meeting with a German speaker on 'German education today'. She 'spoke highly of Hitler's efforts to increase the well-being of the German people as a whole'. However, this is not to say that no left wingers and popular front supporters were involved in it. Several CAPR members were involved and Henry Bolton was in Chopwell LNU. *Blaydon Courier*, 31/10/36, p7 and 18/7/36, p8

⁷¹ At the same time as the Tyneside foodship campaign was in full swing, Anderson appealed to the government to make a fresh grant to the Friends Service Council to help Spanish refugees.

North Mail, 7/7/37, p7 and 19/1/39, p7

⁷² See Trevelyan's comments on the peace conference in chapter five.

address the economic problems of Germany in order to 'disperse the cloud of war'.⁷³ All those who prayed for peace in September 1938 should come forward now, he wrote. This all suggests that he was acting from pacifist and/or humanitarian principles informed by his Quakerism rather than out of a political understanding of the threat posed by fascism.⁷⁴

What Anderson did after his involvement in the foodship campaign does not force a reassessment. His secretaryship of the Tyneside and District Spanish Refugee Ship could just as easily have been inspired by humanitarianism as anti-fascism. The same can be said of his lending support to a shop opened by Tyneside Friends of China.⁷⁵ This point is strengthened by the appearance of Anderson's signature, along with seven others, on a letter in May 1939. The eight stated their desire to not 'obstruct conscription' and that they had no 'corporate view' on the rights and wrongs of conscription.⁷⁶ They were 'united by a common concern that every effort shall be made to guarantee the strict observance of the conscience clause' and requested an improvement in the way in which Conscientious Objectors were dealt with, offering advice to people who were in doubt over the 'right course'.⁷⁷ This was classic Quaker pacifism/humanitarianism. Anderson's name does not come up in the sources in relation to the Cripps inspired popular front agitation, or indeed in relation to any other 'political' agitation that year. That the most high profile and involved figure in the foodship campaign was not obviously politicised by his involvement is significant as it appears that Anderson was, in fact, representative of the campaign as a whole.

Thus it can be concluded that the central committee cannot be perceived as a popular front. Whilst it encompassed people of differing classes and backgrounds, they were not united in sharing a common 'political' analysis of the Spanish conflict. When the appeal was couched in humanitarian terms by members of the central committee it is likely that, for Anderson at least, this was how the situation was perceived, rather than this being a tactic to minimise opposition to the appeal and therefore maximise the fund raising potential of the project. With the other central committee members who have been identified and on which information can be gleaned, it is often difficult to say whether they were 'concerned with the rights and wrongs of the present conflict in Spain' or not.⁷⁸ This is quite surprising given that the whole project was a TJPC initiative, as is the fact that prominent left or Communist members of the TJPC

⁷³ *Shields Gazette*, 15/2/39, p4

⁷⁴ For a recent study of Quaker theology see P. Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers. The Silent Revolution* (Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter, 1996)

⁷⁵ *North Mail*, 4/7/39, p6

⁷⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 12/5/39, p13

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3/1/39, p4

like Henry Bolton or Nell Badsey do not seem to have been involved at all in the foodship campaign. It is conceivable that this was because they were too obviously 'political'.⁷⁹

Did the sub-committees represent a popular front? It can be safely assumed that the Labour and Communist campaign organisers in the sub-committees had a 'political' motive: that the foodship would aid the Republic against Franco and fascism. Many of the left wingers previously mentioned were active and vocal anti-fascists throughout this period.⁸⁰ It is likely that most, if not all, of those involved in the CAPR shared this anti-fascist, pro-democracy political perspective. However, the same cannot be said of the Conservatives in the sub-committees. Firstly, there is positive evidence of only one Conservative involved in a sub-committee, and that was the chairperson of Jarrow Conservative Association, C.V.H. Vincent, in Jarrow. Vincent seemed fairly progressive. He moved a resolution at Conservative Party conference in 1936 urging government help for Jarrow. He was also a playwright and one of his plays, *Ten 'till Three*, was burned in Germany as the censor thought it contained 'unflattering references' to Hitler.⁸¹ However, he was not anti-fascist before the foodship. At the time of Eden's resignation he thought that there had never been 'a greater opportunity of cementing European peace than today and such peace could only be ensured by speedy friendship with Italy'.⁸² Moreover, his active involvement in the campaign was not evidence of his conversion to an anti-fascist, anti-Chamberlain point of view brought on by exposure to anti-fascist propaganda around the conflict in Spain. Midway through the campaign Vincent himself moved a motion conveying Jarrow Conservative Association's 'loyal Christmas greetings' to Chamberlain.⁸³ It is likely that Vincent instead saw the campaign very much in the same terms as Jarrow Conservatives saw the 1936 Jarrow March; as a non-political, non-partisan effort for solely humanitarian ends. This is not surprising, given that this was precisely how the central committee framed the campaign.

Unfortunately, little can be said about the attitudes of the Conservative patrons of the campaign. There is no evidence of Ridley's attitude to the conflict in Spain either before or after the foodship. In March 1938 at a candidate selection meeting, the South Shields National Liberal PPC Herbert William Pilkington announced his support for the government including its foreign policy, but there is no information about him after this time.⁸⁴ Generally, the

⁷⁹ Or perhaps they were too busy; Bolton, supporting Cripps' Petition Campaign and Badsey, running the Basque children's hostel in Tynemouth.

⁸⁰ There was no obvious ILP involvement in the Tyneside foodship campaign

⁸¹ *Shields Gazette*, 9/6/39, p6

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7/3/38, p5

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16/12/38, p11

⁸⁴ Headlam Diary, 2/3/38 (DRO, D/HE/34)

Tyneside foodship campaign drew few patrons from the right of the political spectrum. Another Conservative named as supporting the campaign actively was Michael Weaver. At the Newcastle foodship public meeting in January 1939 he said that he had gone to Spain, in November 1938 a Franco supporter but, after visiting both sides, he had returned as pro-Republic.⁸⁵ Strictly speaking, as he was from Workington, he was not a north east Conservative. In addition, it is uncertain precisely *why* Weaver had changed sides. It does not follow that because he was now pro-Republic he was anti-fascist *per se*. He may have shared the motives of fellow Conservative, the misnamed 'Red' Duchess of Atholl who saw a Franco victory as damaging to the British Empire.⁸⁶ Being anti-Franco or anti-Hitler because they posed a threat to British imperial interests was very different from opposing fascism on ideological grounds. In other words, there was a wide gulf between anti-fascists who opposed the *idea* of fascism and those who opposed fascism because of an inconvenience its practical application in a specific country happened to entail.⁸⁷ However, for the purposes of this study, a potential popular fronter is anyone who revealed an anti-fascist attitude, regardless of what motivations lay behind their anti-fascism. Even given this very wide definition, there is no evidence that any Conservative in the north east was involved in the Tyneside foodship campaign because of their anti-fascist and anti-appeasement politics. Precisely the same argument can be made for the representatives of the 'non political' Town's Womens' Guilds and the various churches. The most obvious assumption is that they saw the issue in the terms in which it was presented: as a non-political, humanitarian cause.

Furthermore, if this was the case, then it can be argued that the campaign only achieved the semblance of a popular front at all precisely *because* the issue was *not* depicted as a 'political' one. Len Edmondson noted that, within 'Aid Spain' activities, 'none of it [politics] was ever raised then. It didn't interfere with any of the local activity on behalf of aid for

⁸⁵ *North Mail*, 23/1/39, p5 and *Newcastle Journal*, 23/1/39, p7

⁸⁶ In 1935 Atholl was a right wing rebel who resigned the Conservative whip over the India Bill. She was converted to support for the Republic after reading *Mein Kampf*, although she remained reactionary on domestic issues. In May 1936 the 'Red Duchess' argued against the raising of the school leaving age as the British export industry needed 'small hands' to work their machines. Even a keen popular fronter like Trevelyan recognised, in a letter to Atholl supporting her standing as an independent Conservative against the government's foreign policy in December 1938, that 'About many domestic questions there may remain at present wide differences of opinion between us'.

Parliamentary Debates, Vol.312,c.1885, 26/5/36 and Vol.317,c.337-44, 5/11/36; C.P. Trevelyan letter to Atholl, 28/11/38 (NRL, CPT153) and R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933-39* (Constable, 1980) p235

⁸⁷ There was another dimension to this which Orwell pointed out when discussing the popular front in Spain: 'For even when the worker and the bourgeois are both fighting against Fascism, *they are not fighting for the same things*; the bourgeois is fighting for bourgeois democracy, i.e. capitalism; the worker, in so far as he understands the issue, for Socialism' [my emphasis].

'Spilling the Spanish Beans', in G. Orwell, op cit., p217

Spain'.⁸⁸ The lack of political discussion explains why more middle class and conservative elements were easily incorporated into the campaign. It also explains why, despite rivalry between the British left parties which was exacerbated by the Communist suppression of the POUM and subsequent persecution of ILP men associated with it in Spain, there was no breakdown in co-operation between ILP and CP members on Tynemouth Basque refugee hostel management committee.

Apart from those discussed above, no other high profile north east Conservatives were involved in the foodship campaign. As has been seen, some north east Conservatives overtly supported Franco who they perceived as a Christian democrat seeking to rescue Spain from Communists. Others remained 'neutral', supporting the government's non-intervention policy. No prominent Conservative in the north east had a good word to say about the Republic and this did not change with the Tyneside foodship campaign. At the very time the campaign was in full swing, Alfred Denville MP, at a meeting in Newcastle, 'deplored the over-keen interest taken in the Spanish civil war and suggested that there was plenty to occupy us at home'.⁸⁹ The only evidence of rank-and-file Conservative attitudes to the campaign comes from contemporaries. Whilst Frank Graham noted that 'even the Conservative Party weren't hostile' to the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, there is little positive evidence of Conservatives collecting for these committees.⁹⁰ Len Edmondson was fairly sure that there were no Conservatives involved in this activity.⁹¹ Charlie Woods, a prominent local Communist, concurred.⁹²

Many of the same observations can be made about those who donated to the fund. Most pertinent in this connection are the Women's Institutes (WI) and women's sections of the Royal British Legion (RBL) which organised fund raising events for the foodship (and possibly co-operated in the local committees). Again, whilst there were several hundred WI branches in the region, there is only direct evidence of five which donated. (There is no evidence at all of which particular women's RBL sections donated to the foodship).⁹³ The WI and women's sections of the RBL are important because both were ostensibly 'non-political' bodies. There

⁸⁸ Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98

⁸⁹ *North Mail*, 26/1/39, p1

As seen in chapter seven, Denville was a strong Franco supporter.

⁹⁰ Frank Graham Interview, 21/10/94

There may have been Conservatives amongst the LNU members collecting.

⁹¹ Len Edmondson Interview, 4/5/99

⁹² Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4/M/1)

⁹³ In November 1936 the Northumberland Federation of WIs had 151 branches with 9,251 members. In July 1937 there were 160 WI branches in County Durham with 15,000 members. In 1935 there were 53 women's sections of the Royal British Legion in the north east (and 81 branches altogether in the region). *Newcastle Journal*, 30/11/36, p5; *Durham Chronicle*, 16/7/37, p15 and P. Lynn, 'The Impact of Women. The Shaping of Political Allegiance in County Durham, 1918-1945', *The Local Historian*, Vol.23, No.3 (1998) p166

were fears in the labour movement, however, that the WI was really a bastion of conservatism and this was especially true of the north east as the Conservative associations themselves were fairly weak.⁹⁴ The same was true of the women's sections of the RBL. Pauline Lynn stated that they were similar as the RBL was 'another ostensibly non-political organisation which arguably won support for the Conservative party'.⁹⁵ Until the time of the Tyneside foodship regular press reports on the activities of individual WI branches reveal no indication that any great interest was taken by them in the Spanish conflict, nor, indeed, in any other 'political' matters, save one or two branches which were involved with the LNU. For example, Shiney Row WI voted unanimously to become an associate body of the LNU.⁹⁶ A few branches did donate to the foodship, but again there is no indication that this was for a 'political' motive. Again, it seems that the issue fitted in well with the other humanitarian charity causes that the WIs involved themselves in such as collecting for hospitals.

WI branch activities after the foodship campaign ended suggest that it had had no identifiable political impact. Normal charitable activities were resumed and there is little indication of greater political awareness and involvement in most WIs. There were only a handful of incidences indicating possible increased interest in politics and the international situation. Nedderton WI heard a lecture on the League of Nations in June 1939, and there was a 'talk on Spain' to Cleadon WI in July 1939.⁹⁷ The content of the talk on Spain remained undisclosed and members of all the major political parties still paid lip service to the idea of the League of Nations, so it was hardly controversial. This suggests that the foodship campaign was merely seen as another deserving charity.

The extent to which the 'Aid Spain' campaigns politicised was another important aspect of the debate about the political nature of the campaigns (and consequently the extent to which they can be perceived as a de facto popular front). As argued above, they did not seem

⁹⁴ One way of promoting conservatism was to down-play class to convince women that they had special interests separate to those of men and that their class differences did not matter. In April 1937 the vice-president of Durham Federation of WIs said 'we are all alike in the Women's Institute. We forget about class distinctions. We have women's problems to meet and it does not matter about class at all when we are discussing these'. Consett DLP, for one, expressed concern at the pernicious influence of WIs in December 1936.

North Mail, 29/4/37, p8 and *Durham County Advertiser*, 11/12/36, p10

⁹⁵ P. Lynn, op cit., p166

⁹⁶ *Durham Chronicle*, 17/12/37, p17

There were some isolated examples however. Pitlington WI heard a lecture on Spain in May 1937. There was a talk on a 'Russia visit' at Cambo WI. This could have been due to the presence of Lady Trevelyan (who was on the Northumberland Federation of WIs executive.) Sleekburn WI also received a talk on Russia. In contrast, Leamside & West Rainton WI had a talk on Nazi Germany. In none of these cases was any idea given in the reports of what was said.

North Mail, 27/4/37, p5; 5/7/38, p9; 20/4/39, p8; *Sunday Sun*, 30/10/38, p17 and *Durham Chronicle*, 14/5/37, p4

to politicise those prominently involved at central and sub-committee level. The Conservative Vincent illustrates the fact that involvement in the campaign did not necessarily indicate an anti-fascist viewpoint. Moreover, involvement did not necessarily alter an individuals' perspective to an anti-fascist, anti-appeasement one during or after the campaign. The example of Anderson reveals that a moral or humanitarian viewpoint was also not necessarily altered into a political one by participation in the campaign. WI involvement demonstrates that those organising internal events to raise funds for the campaign were not necessarily politicised. Ellen Wilkinson's comment on the national BCC equally applied to the people and groups involved in the Tyneside foodship: 'No one has shifted their political or religious affiliations by a hair-breadth by working on that committee, but on big humanitarian issues, British people have somehow learned to co-operate'.⁹⁸

The Historical Debate and the Foodship

Though prominent individuals involved do not appear to have been politicised, it is conceivable that grass roots campaigners who went on door-to-door collections for the sub-committees were. Jim Fyrth claimed that political arguments were essential to collecting and other campaigning activities and that this changed people's political consciousness. Whilst these campaigns did not change government or Labour Party policy at the time, Fyrth claimed that they were vital to Labour's electoral success in 1945 as they had politicised many.⁹⁹ However, this argument does not stand up to scrutiny. As discussed above, the whole manner in which the foodship campaign (and the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns that took on the appearance of popular fronts) was presented was intended to minimise the politics of the issue in order, presumably, to maximise the support. It is thus unlikely that those who had never before been involved in such a campaign were politicised by it. A far more likely scenario than that of a volunteer collector, new to such activity, having a 'political' discussion on the doorstep about the rights and wrongs of Franco and fascism, was that of the collector merely asking for money or food to help starving Spanish women and children. No one but the poorest or hardest hearted would refuse to donate. An apolitical collector could simply say that they knew nothing of the politics of the situation, but only that innocent Spanish civilians were starving to death. Politics did not have to enter the discussion if the collector did not wish it to.

⁹⁷ *North Mail*, 20/6/39, p8 and 18/7/39, p2

⁹⁸ *Sunday Sun*, 20/12/36, p12

⁹⁹ J. Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.35 (1993) pp162-163

More evidence of this is the manner in which Anderson replied to questions about the fund that collectors often met with on the doorstep.¹⁰⁰ As has been demonstrated, Anderson was keen to show that the foodship was not about taking sides. There is no reason to believe that the responses Anderson supplied in the newspaper were not the self same responses that collectors used when asked by prospective donors if the foodship was not a partisan effort. A collector could, of course, choose a more robust and political defence of the foodship and therefore the Republic, but they would do that *if they were that way inclined in the first place*. To someone new to collecting who had volunteered for the campaign and was unaware of or unmoved by the politics of the issue, it would be logical to use Anderson's arguments on the doorstep. These collectors would not be inadvertently politicised by their involvement by being thrust reluctantly into political debates with prospective donors. Of course, this is not to say that *no one* was politicised by their involvement in this campaign, but these were surely the exception rather than the rule.

In order to counter the charge that humanitarianism was the main motivating force of those collecting for 'Spain', Jim Fyrth employed two further arguments. Firstly, he argued that: 'To collect, or even give food or money for Spain became a political act as well as a humanitarian one, because the collection was probably organised by people of left sympathies on behalf of people with a left-wing government opposed by the British government and abused by most of the Conservative media'.¹⁰¹ With the case of the Tyneside foodship, some of the central organisers did have 'left wing sympathies' of some description. However, this was not the case for many in the sub-committees who organised and participated in collections on the ground. And the foodship was intended to feed those who happened to be in that 'left-wing government's territory', it was not a collection to aid the *government itself*, despite the fact that the food would indirectly help the government's struggle. Even if the collection had been organised by 'left wing' people for a 'left-wing government', if these people had said the money was for a humanitarian fund then the act of collecting for that fund would in no sense become political, as the politics would be a minor and inconsequential side issue. A person collecting for the blind is still performing a humanitarian act even if they are organised by a person of 'left sympathies' and have 'left sympathies' themselves. The act no more becomes political if either or both the donor and the blind person who receives the charity also have 'left-wing sympathies'.

¹⁰⁰ *North Mail*, 19/1/39, p6 and *Shields Gazette*, 19/1/39, p4

¹⁰¹ J. Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain', p162

The very fact that the appeal was for the 'people of Spain' suggests a politically neutral humanitarianism.

Secondly, Fyrth claimed that the idea of saving Spain from fascism and the humanitarian aspect 'were rarely separate in the minds of those taking part [...]'.¹⁰² This is nothing but wishful thinking. True, Fyrth was involved himself in these activities, which makes him privy to information that later historians do not have. But it also means he is indelibly tainted by the thinking and propaganda of his milieu at the time. Fyrth was a Communist and it was in the CP's interests to depict these campaigns as political, for here was their popular front in action. Perhaps Fyrth actually believed that he was involved in an informal popular front at the time. This does not mean that he actually *was*. Fyrth and his Communist comrades may have thought they were members of a revolutionary party in the thirties. This, too, does not mean that they were. There is no way Fyrth could know what the majority involved in these type of campaigns thought unless he had interviewed a significant number of those of different classes and political persuasions involved in fund raising (now, of course, impossible). The evidence of what Fyrth and his comrades thought at the time is insufficient by itself. Fyrth seems to be unable, not surprisingly, to detach his historical comment from his personal experiences, and thus his account of the 'Aid Spain movement' often reads as mere Communist propaganda rather than history. The foodship campaign was presented as an humanitarian effort and this at least gives us some idea of why people became involved. And, because fund raisers could avoid political discussion on the doorsteps, the potential for politicising donors to the campaign was also minimised. Whether those who were already 'political' used political arguments or not on the doorstep is another question. It is quite conceivable that they did, but if they had followed the lead of the central committee organisers who were politically motivated but who depicted the foodship as non-political, then this would not have happened.

Mike Squires, another historian with Communist sympathies, took Fyrth's arguments one step further. He contended that those who donated to these campaigns both showed sympathy with the plight of the hungry in Spain and 'at the same time, although not always in a conscious way, registered their abhorrence of fascism, and their support of democracy'.¹⁰³ This is absurd. If the people themselves were not conscious anti-fascists, it is not tenable, 60 years later, to speculate on their sub-conscious thoughts. If the campaign had been expressed in political, anti-fascist terms it would be reasonably certain that donors were anti-fascist. This was not the case and the proportion of those wishing to express anti-fascist sentiment against

¹⁰² Ibid.,

The two do seem to have existed in the mind of the Duchess of Atholl, as we have seen, but the humanitarian comments were for tactical reasons. Atholl definitely desired a Republic victory and must have seen foodships as way of promoting this.

¹⁰³ M. Squires, *The Aid to Spain Movement in Battersea, 1936-1939* (Elmfield Publications, 1994) p40

those donating for humanitarian reasons can only be speculated at. Of course, many who gave to the fund would have been both anti-Franco and anti-fascist. It is possible that the majority were. The important point here is that these people *were anti-fascist anyway*. The foodship campaign had not ‘converted’ them to this stance; they had not been politicised by it.

The contemporary comment by the *Gateshead Labour Herald* that the foodship was ‘[...] a convincing demonstration of the active support and sympathy for the government of Spain which exists among all classes of people and also among all political creeds’ [my emphasis] is that of political activists promoting a cause.¹⁰⁴ The Labour Party was pro-Republic and could thus be expected to depict the campaign in such a way. A more plausible comment, given the way in which the campaign was framed, was that the foodship was ‘a convincing demonstration of the active support and sympathy for the *women and children* of Spain which exists among all classes of people and also among all political creeds’. Those involved in the campaign could not have it both ways. Either they asked for money for starving civilians, or they collected to save the Republic by defeating fascism. They chose the former course, and the response was perhaps broader and stronger because of this.¹⁰⁵ (Although this of course cannot be shown, and it could be argued that a campaign based on an anti-fascist rather than humanitarian message may have raised as much or even more money and food).¹⁰⁶ What the response certainly was *not* was a demonstration of support for the Republic. Labour activists whose sympathies lay with the Republic could seek to paint the foodship with the political hue they liked, but the message the main organisers of the campaign consistently put out was that the foodship was non-political and humanitarian.

Jim Fyrth was half right to claim that the ‘Aid Spain’ campaigns were seen by the Labour leadership as ‘backdoor Popular Fronts’ making Communists respectable while bringing in Conservatives and Liberals.¹⁰⁷ While it is likely that the Labour leadership did feel threatened by these local campaign committees (but not, as has been seen, sufficiently

¹⁰⁴ *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 2/1/39, p2

As noted above, Gateshead Labour Party framed the foodship campaign appeal in partly political but largely humanitarian terms.

¹⁰⁵ The *Newcastle Journal*, for example, supported the campaign as it was ‘conceived in pure charity and should have a charitable backing’.

Newcastle Journal, 12/12/38, p8

¹⁰⁶ George Orwell took this a significant step further by arguing that strikes and boycotts for revolutionary Spain would have secured far more working class support in Britain and elsewhere rather than relatively poorly supported and ultimately ineffectual ‘Aid Spain’ campaigns for ‘democratic Spain’. As Orwell pointed out, this could not happen due to the Soviet Union’s foreign policy and its consequent advocacy of the popular front strategy. Fenner Brockway made a similar point.

‘Homage to Catalonia’ in G. Orwell, op cit., p188 and F. Brockway, *The Workers Front* (Secker & Warburg, 1938) pp145-6

¹⁰⁷ J. Fyrth, ‘The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-39’, p160

threatened to expel members involved in them in the region), the fact is Communists were not made respectable simply because politics were not discussed. For the most part, it is likely that those involved in the campaign were not even aware they were rubbing shoulders with Communists. An example of this is the appeal issued by a large number of Sunderland dignitaries supporting the foodship. Frank Graham's name appeared in this list but there is no suggestion of his political affiliation (the fact that he was an ex-IB member was not even stated).¹⁰⁸ As has been seen, Communists only accessed Labour platforms in this period when their political affiliation was not explicitly stated. If they were appreciated in these sub-committees, then they would have been appreciated as individuals, not as Communists. They would not have generated political kudos for their party. Communists only achieved an apparent air of respectability because the fact that they *were* Communists was not made public knowledge. That Communists were not open about their politics at this time was admitted by Hymie Lee when reporting on the situation in the north east in March 1939. Lee complained that: 'in all the mass activity we are hiding the face of the party. Communists are working everywhere but they don't show that they are Communists'.¹⁰⁹ Kevin Morgan noted that the party leadership was both aware and perturbed by the tendency of some Communists to 'get immersed in practical affairs and neglect to relate the practical fight to the aims of the Party'.¹¹⁰ The same problem arose elsewhere. Willie Thompson remarked that Communists in the Labour Party had to conceal their membership of the CP 'which was no basis for winning acceptance in that quarter'.¹¹¹ The Communists had, in the form of Tom Aisbitt, one of the most influential trade unionists in the north east. Yet they remained a small and un-influential force in the official movement in the region throughout this period. Aisbitt, though involving his trade council in every left wing cause in the period, was not able to openly call himself a Communist, and thus his true political affiliation did not greatly benefit from his activity.

The other main pillar of the argument that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were political, was that some of those politicised joined the CP. Noreen Branson argued that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns and others that the CP was involved in during the 'popular front' period from 1935 had positive benefits for the party:

'What Communist Parties all over the world, including Britain, had begun to understand was that if you can lead people into action on some issue on which they feel strongly, the

¹⁰⁸ F. Graham, *op cit.*, p34

¹⁰⁹ CP Central Committee Minutes, 19/3/39, Reel No.10 (MLHA)

¹¹⁰ K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-1941* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989) p13

¹¹¹ W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism, 1920-1991* (Pluto, 1992) p63

very experience itself can bring about a change in their ideas, can open their minds to the need for a new kind of society, whereas you seldom convert anyone to socialism by preaching from the sidelines'.¹¹²

This claim sounds reasonable but raises the question: if these campaigns were so successful, why did the Tyneside foodship (and the other foodship campaigns going on throughout the country concurrently) bring no direct benefit to the CP in the form of new recruits? Andrew Thorpe noted, on a national level, that CP membership 'shot up' between September and December 1938 and then hit a 'plateau' January to July 1939. This, Thorpe commented, backs up other analyses of the CP that indicate after 'a period of rapid expansion, the popular front had run out of steam'.¹¹³ Although the campaign in the north east began in December, it really peaked in February 1939. Thus, Communist recruits would be expected to be noticeable in February and March, rather than at the very beginning of the campaign, before Communists involved had had a chance to make their presence felt. A plateau might be expected *after* the Republic fell in April, but not in the months before. Membership figures for the north east are even more exaggerated than the national equivalent at this time. However, there are some discrepancies in the available figures. The CP North East District Congress in August 1938 had 550 members represented at it.¹¹⁴ Yet a central CP document listed the North East membership at the time of the 15th Congress in summer 1938 as 535, a small difference.¹¹⁵ What can be seen is that, far from increasing in the year leading up to war, Communist membership in the north east *actually decreased*. William Rust highlighted this in a report on party organisation to the CP Central Committee in March 1939. Rust noted increases of membership in London, the Midlands, Eastern Counties and Hampshire but declines in Scotland and the North East (by 50).¹¹⁶ The CP in Scotland already had a large membership so, though a decline in 1939 was disappointing, it was perhaps not unexpected. Equally, small increases in South Wales would be expected as the party was already strong there. Rust also noted that in South Wales the

¹¹² N. Branson, 'Myths from Right and Left' in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p127

¹¹³ A. Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *Historical Journal*, Vol.43, No.3 (2000) p783

¹¹⁴ *North Mail*, 29/8/38, p5

CP Central Committee 15th Congress Report, 1938, p30, Reel No.3 (MLHA)

¹¹⁵ In fact even the central CP records contradict each other. Of two membership lists in the records, the figures agree on 535 for 15th Congress, yet one claims 500 members on 31 January 1939 whilst the other claims 548 in February 1939. It is unlikely the party increased by a tenth in less than a month, yet it is also unlikely that the party membership did not change at all between January and May 1939 as one list gives the same figure of 500 for both months.

CP Documents on Organisation, 1940, Reel No.7 (MLHA)

¹¹⁶ Rust was obviously working to the first list of figures in his assessment. This suggests that this was the more valid of the two sets of figures.

CP Central Committee Minutes, 19/3/39, Reel No.10 (MLHA)

'syndicalism' strong in the political culture meant that the average CP member did not attach as much importance to the party as to the union. The North East District did not have this excuse. The decline in the north east was a disaster for the party in the region, as membership was already very low there. It also suggests that as well as running out of steam, the popular front seems to have gone into reverse in the region, and this at the very same time as the largest and most co-ordinated popular front style campaign, in the form of the Tyneside foodship, was in full swing.¹¹⁷ No wonder, then, that at the same time as Lee complained that the party had no profile despite its activity in the north east he added that: 'there is no feeling about the party growing'.¹¹⁸ This was not a coincidence.¹¹⁹

Hywel Francis' treatment of the situation in South Wales was similar to that of Fyrth. Francis claimed that 'It was only in South Wales that such a broad front [popular front] had any success at all, and even here it was temporary, brittle and short-lived'.¹²⁰ An 'informal Popular Front' had been emerging in the region since late 1936, founded entirely on the question of solidarity with Spain.¹²¹ Francis claimed that there was 'anxiety' at local level to unite on an anti-fascist front regardless of party affiliation. Thus the Spanish civil war created a unity that might not have happened otherwise and the Labour Party generally turned a blind eye to CP/Labour co-operation. Whilst there was widespread co-operation in Welsh SMACs, the basis of the appeal was 'always humanitarian rather than political'.¹²² Many local ILPers ultimately attacked this 'quasi popular frontism'.¹²³ With the fund raising for the four Basque children's homes in South Wales the campaign 'therefore became less ideological and more

¹¹⁷ The relative decline of the North East District membership can be illustrated by Thorpe's figures. The CP in the north east accounted, at the peak of its influence in October 1927, for 17.7% of the whole membership. In August 1930 the figure was 5.1%. By September 1938 this had actually declined to 3.4%. In January 1939 it was even less at 3.1% and by June 1939 it was a paltry 2.8%.

A. Thorpe, op cit., p790

¹¹⁸ CP Central Committee Minutes, 19/3/39, Reel No.10 (MLHA)

¹¹⁹ Murphy argued that a lack of continuity and stability in the West Yorkshire District CP leadership may have been a factor in its slow progress in 1937. There was a parallel with the north east here: Aitken, who was north east district representative on the Central Committee in 1936, had achieved this position after only being in the region a few months (in fact he may have been brought into the area in order to fill the position). Worse, he remained only a short time in the region before leaving for Spain in late 1936. Then two people, Allen and Lee, represented the north east district on the Central Committee, 1937-9. As has been seen in chapters one and four, Aitken and Allen seem to have had only a tenuous grasp on the political reality of their party in the region. While this apparent lack of continuity and experience certainly did not help the CP's development in the region, it is unlikely that it would have been significantly different had there been different and more consistent leadership.

D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p318

¹²⁰ H. Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1984) p112

¹²¹ Ibid., p115

¹²² Ibid., p120

¹²³ Ibid.,

humanitarian in its work, partly because of its wider social support'.¹²⁴ Though interesting, Francis provided little real analysis of the humanitarian versus political aspect of the question and its implications for the popular front. Both Francis and Fyrth seem content to claim that any organisation that contained members of different political parties was a de facto popular front. In this highly unsatisfactory definition, all charities could be defined as popular fronts, or at least as possessing the characteristics of popular fronts. Peter Drake, on the other hand, was aware of the implications of humanitarianism in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns for the popular front. He argued that the potential of popular front activity arising from 'Aid Spain' campaigns was non-existent. The response of the Conservative mayor to the Basque refugees neutralised the question and it did not become a rallying point for Liberals and socialists.¹²⁵

Involvement in these 'Aid Spain' campaigns (ones that entailed the raising of funds or medical supplies with a humanitarian message and not those framed in political terms or demanding a change in government policy) clearly did not benefit the CP directly. What was true of the north east presumably stood for the country as a whole. So, was the framing of these particular campaigns in humanitarian terms a deliberate policy of the Labour left and CP, in order to attract those who would normally shun left wing politics and, theoretically, bring them to socialism as Fyrth claimed? It is difficult to say. The Tyneside foodship sprung from the TJPC that was chiefly under the influence of the CP and Labour left wingers. Yet, as already noted, many of these left wingers (Badsey, Bolton, etc.,) were not obviously involved. Either this too was a deliberate policy not to scare off the middle classes, or it happened that the more middle class 'moralist' figures took over the running of the campaign and made these decisions. The Tyneside foodship certainly appears to have been run like others in the country, suggesting that all regional organisers were following a nationally constructed plan. This plan presumably came from the Labour Spain Committee nationally which launched the foodships campaign (which, Buchanan pointed out, was 'purely' humanitarian) in autumn 1938.¹²⁶ If this were the case it would be interesting to know precisely how this plan came about and who played the major part in deciding to concentrate on humanitarianism and eschew politics. A more detailed study of the national genesis of the foodship campaigns needs to be undertaken to ascertain this. If the CP and pro-popular front elements of the Labour Party had played the major role in determining this 'non-political' strategy then it was a major failure. It demanded

¹²⁴ Ibid., p127

¹²⁵ P.D. Drake, 'Labour and Spain: British Labour's Response to the Spanish Civil War With Particular Reference to the Labour Movement in Birmingham', M.Litt. Thesis, Birmingham University (1977) p167

¹²⁶ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991) p127

huge amounts of energy and brought no obvious gain either for their political standpoint (and party) or for the cause of the Spanish Republic. Perhaps there was no ulterior motive; that the strategy of de-politicising these campaigns was not to attempt to create something akin to a popular front but to simply maximise support by minimising the offence conceivably brought by left politics. Possibly the more moral and humanitarian elements that were clearly involved at the highest level in the region played the major part in making these decisions, in which case the left was culpable only in that it went along with what was decided, a strategy which could not and did not bring any kind of pressure to bear on the government to revoke non-intervention. Conceivably, the left was too weak to influence the decision making process and went along with the campaigns because they wanted in some way to help the Republic. If these campaigns are the only thing that Communist supporters of the popular front strategy could point to in its defence, then the strategy was a complete failure. Communist involvement in campaigns such as the Tyneside foodship had not even converted people to the idea that fascism was a bad thing, let alone converted them to socialism. This campaign was the perfect example of why the popular front strategy could not have been more ill-suited to introducing people to revolutionary left politics. (Of course it could plausibly be argued that the popular front strategy had never been intended to bring people to revolutionary politics, but rather that the argument was a sugar coating on a policy that many Communists regarded as a very bitter pill).

As the extent to which the humanitarian emphasis of these 'Aid Spain' campaigns was determined by the CP and Labour left in accordance with the popular front strategy is unclear, little of certainty can be said about the strategy in relation to the views of historians. If it is assumed that either the CP did have a significant say in determining this strategy, or that the strategy was seen as being in accordance with their conception of the popular front, then some comments can be made. The evidence of the north east 'Aid Spain' campaigns calls into question the claims of several historians. Willie Thompson's argument that the popular front tactic was sound but that it could not make up for the damage done to the party in the third period when it lost most of its organic links to the labour movement, does not stand up in this case.¹²⁷ John Callaghan's claim that the popular front policy did not necessarily mean that the CP had accepted reformism can also be questioned. True, Communists did often 'became part of a broader political culture than anything they had experienced before' but, as has been argued, this was at the expense of losing their status as Communists.¹²⁸ Noreen Branson's

¹²⁷ W. Thompson, op cit., pp42-64

¹²⁸ J. Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt. A Study in British Stalinism* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1993) p173

defence of the popular front strategy in the face of detractors like Trotsky and the Trotskyist historian Hugo Dewar, who claimed that the popular front necessitated the damping down of the class struggle, also seems a little feeble. Surely there was no more effective way of damping down class struggle than by eschewing politics altogether?¹²⁹ Certainly, contrary to Branson's rebuttal, Dewar's claim that the strategy led to the CP creating an atmosphere favourable to a 'non-class view of the social conflict' was true for these 'Aid Spain' campaigns.¹³⁰

However, it would be wrong to generalise too much about the popular front strategy from the experience of one particular set of campaigns. Kevin Morgan, though taking a relatively positive approach to the popular front strategy, highlighted the contradictions it entailed. It was employed to differing degrees in many different struggles. It seems to have been successful in some areas, such as in tenants' struggles through which many would come to see the true nature of capitalism.¹³¹ The case of the Tyneside foodship has revealed that the strategy as it applied (and *if* it was applied) to many of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns was a disaster. It is fairly clear though that the 'political' campaigns that the CP organised on Spain, demanding arms and an end to non-intervention (as well as recruiting for the IB, an act that could not be depicted as humanitarian), must have gained it rewards in recruits, as did its obviously political stand against the BUF. But were these and the tenants' struggles also part of the popular front strategy? If the strategy is defined as anything that the CP did between 1935-1939, then they were. Morgan claimed that the essence of the popular front strategy was that the CP should work 'in a non-sectarian way in broad organisations which stood for far less than communism'.¹³² This would allow Communist involvement in almost any organisation or campaign on almost any basis.

How did the popular front affect the CP's attitude to industrial direct action for political ends? Laybourn and Murphy claimed that despite the CP's involvement in many campaigns its 'primary interest appears to have been to encourage more direct action'.¹³³ On the other hand, Buchanan stated that the CP 'did not support industrial action for Spain which would run counter to the appeal to the middle classes inherent in the popular front strategy'.¹³⁴ There is no doubt that, theoretically speaking, the popular front demanded a toning down of

¹²⁹ N. Branson, 'Myths from Right and Left' in J. Fyrth (ed.), *op cit.*, pp120-127

¹³⁰ H. Dewar, *Communist Politics in Britain. The CPGB From its Origins to the Second World War* (Pluto, 1976) p109

¹³¹ K. Morgan, *op cit.*, p40

¹³² *Ibid.*, p12

¹³³ K. Laybourn & D. Murphy, *Under the Red Flag. A History of Communism in Britain, 1849-1991* (Sutton, Stroud, 1999) p93

Communist slogans and activities, which, of course, included direct action. As Brockway wrote:

‘The Popular Front is a consistent policy. It seeks to mobilise the maximum unity for the defence of Capitalist democracy. But let no one pretend that it is a Socialist policy. By its very nature the Popular Front, because it is based on an alliance with Capitalist Parties, must be non-proletarian and non-Socialist. It represents a surrender of the class struggle and of the social revolution. The evidence from every country in the world where the Popular Front has been operated or advocated proves this to be the case’.¹³⁵

Thus, Dewar was right to highlight that the popular front demanded the damping down of class struggle, and it must have had this effect in some campaigns. This aspect of the theoretical basis of the popular front also provides a further reason why it was not popular within the official labour movement. As argued in chapter five, there was considerable support for a labour movement conference on the international situation in 1938 and the NEFTC, NTFLP and Co-operative Party conference in June 1938 explicitly mentioned industrial action as a method of placing pressure on the Chamberlain government or removing it from office altogether.¹³⁶ Though too much should not be read into one resolution, it surely cannot be dismissed as, in Naylor’s words, an ‘odd hiccup’ and suggests that the official labour movement in the north east was not as uniformly right wing as it has generally been depicted.¹³⁷ It seems likely that a significant section of the regional trade union rank-and-file were favourably disposed towards the use of industrial direct action for political ends and that the CP could have capitalised on this feeling if it had openly advocated such a policy.¹³⁸ In

¹³⁴ T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, p122

¹³⁵ F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p183

Brockway documented the operation of the popular front in several countries in this book.

¹³⁶ *North Mail*, 20/6/38, p7

¹³⁷ B.E. Naylor, ‘Ramsay MacDonald and Seaham Labour Politics’, *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, Vol.15 (1981) p31

Admittedly Naylor was referring here to the national Labour Party attitude (which he was using to highlight the regional attitude). Still, the fact that one of the most important trade union organisations in the region, the NEFTC, helped produce the resolution makes it even more significant as the unions were generally regarded as even less inclined to use industrial direct action for political ends than the Labour Party. Naylor, highlighting the fact that labourism in the region had a ‘right wing base’ and noting the strong rank-and-file loyalty to leaders, argued that these characteristics applied even for the relatively militant DMA lodges in Seaham constituency. Even there ‘industrial militancy was about bread-and-butter issues’. (p31) The evidence discussed in this chapter forces a reconsideration of certain aspects of this generally accepted picture and suggests that, at certain times and under certain conditions, the regional labour movement was ready and able to adopt a militant position that placed it well to the left of, and in conflict with, the national Labour leadership.

¹³⁸ Brockway cited the ‘Hands off Russia’ campaign of 1920, the General Strike in 1926 and, more recently, the ‘mass action by workers’ in February 1935 which forced the government to withdraw its unemployment regulations as evidence that ‘The spirit of class action still lives among the British workers. It has been subdued by dispiriting leadership; but on critical occasions it still rises, overwhelmingly and magnificently’.

F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p146

attempting to garner support from those to the right of the labour movement, the CP sacrificed a policy that may have brought it greater influence within the working class.

Though industrial direct action for political ends was not a nationally advocated Communist policy in this period, due to the exigencies of the popular front, some Communists did organise industrial direct action.¹³⁹ Thus, the evidence Branson used to contradict Dewar also stands up: for example, the Communist dockers blacking the *Haruna Maru* which was taking scrap iron to Japan in January 1938.¹⁴⁰ Brockway was well aware of this apparent contradiction between Communist theory and practice. Noting that the popular front tactic was winning more middle class recruits to the CP, making it increasingly incapable of revolution, he remarked that, as the CP had not yet allied itself with Capitalists;

‘it is able, despite its political tendency, to participate aggressively in the class struggle in many of its phases. It may decide to organise London’s Mayday under the slogan: “For Peace, Democracy and Social progress” but when the bus strike breaks out on Mayday its speakers forget their slogan and concentrate on winning support for the busmen in their class struggle’.¹⁴¹

The full implications of the popular front had not been digested and applied systematically by the CP: there were no established rules for applying the strategy in the widely differing sets of circumstances on the ground. The safest conclusion is that Communists operated in many different and sometimes contradictory ways during this period, and that the popular front was not applied systematically in every campaign and, when it was applied, it did not necessarily dictate the same kind of behaviour. Certainly, if the strategy was about taking each given situation and dealing with it as was seen fit by those who knew most about it (rather than applying some ‘one size fits all’ formula supplied by the Comintern), then it was a positive development, although it would naturally entail many different interpretations. And this is what seems to have happened. In fact, the only time there seems to have been any consistency in the strategy is when the Soviet Union was directly involved. The popular front, for example, demanded the defence of the Show Trials by British Communists. It also demanded the

¹³⁹ This was apart from Communist involvement in the aircraft workers’ shop stewards movement, the London busmen and against company unionism in the mines which Hinton cited as the main reasons for the CP’s growth in the late thirties. Curiously, Hinton had little to say on the effects of the CP’s popular front policy, nor whether its ‘militant trade union activity’ ran contrary to it.

J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism. A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867-1974* (Wheatsheaf Books, Brighton, 1983) pp153-4

¹⁴⁰ Branson called the campaigns against Mosley, against appeasement and in support of Republican Spain ‘great *political* movements’. As has been argued, she was wrong to equate the former two, which were political, with the latter, a significant proportion of which was not.

N. Branson, *op cit.*, p217

¹⁴¹ F. Brockway, *op cit.*, p245

support of the Spanish Republic and government against the Spanish revolutionaries (many members of the CNT-FAI and the POUM), and so forth. Of course, in these cases the strategy was damaging to the party. More importantly, in adopting the popular front policy, the CP sacrificed its 'socialist' programme. As has been argued, the crucial question when attempting to assess the claims of any struggle to the status of a successful popular front, is whether the struggle was depicted and conducted in overtly political terms or not. The 'Aid Spain' campaigns, like the foodship, could have been 'political' if only to the extent of having an anti-fascist message. Had this occurred and had the response still been as socially and politically diverse and generally widespread as it was with the Tyneside foodship etc., then historians who support the popular front strategy from a Communist perspective would have had a far better case for claiming these campaigns as a success for that strategy.

In his study, Murphy did not examine what he deemed the 'Aid-for-Spain movement' as he accepted that the CP had taken a leading role in it. This was strange given how keen he was to debunk the other myths around the CP in the thirties: that the party led the anti-BUF campaign and there was a direct continuity between this and the later Spain campaigns 1933-39.¹⁴² Murphy wrote: 'through its vigorous humanitarian aid campaign in support of Republican Spain and the movements such as the Left Book Club, the Communist Party was to enjoy a limited growth in membership and growing influence amongst the middle class and the intelligentsia'.¹⁴³ As Murphy accepted that the 'Aid-for-Spain movement' benefited the CP, he argued that examination of it could not provide part of the explanation for the failure of the CP to emerge as a mass working class party.¹⁴⁴ Yet, had Murphy examined these 'humanitarian' campaigns, he would have discovered that many were not, in fact, beneficial to the CP for the same reasons that the Tyneside foodship campaign did not benefit the CP. This is not to say that the 'political' demonstrations that the CP mounted for arms to the Republic, the support the Republic received in the pages of the *Daily Worker*, the fact that the CP organised the IB and so forth did not bring them recruits. Rather, it is to argue that much Communist activity in this very wide and diverse 'movement' (if, indeed a collection of some political and some humanitarian campaigns can be described as a movement), did not bring them benefits. Thus,

¹⁴² D.L. Murphy, op cit., p22

Murphy claimed that there was no continuity. Though the CP was 'undoubtedly' in the vanguard of 'Aid-for-Spain movement', the campaign against the BUF 1933-6 was not led by the CP (p23).

¹⁴³ Ibid., p334

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp17-18

Thus, he claimed that in most West Yorkshire towns the CP was at forefront of creating 'Aid-For-Spain' committees but he did not discuss their composition nor their politics and the implications this had for the united front.

Ibid., p320

the 'Aid-for-Spain movement' does in fact provide part of the explanation for the failure of the CP to emerge as a mass working class party.

Instead, Murphy blamed the popular front strategy.¹⁴⁵ In addition to its failure to emerge as significant force within the British labour movement by 1939, Murphy added that the CP had failed to change government foreign policy.¹⁴⁶ These two failures were 'largely' ascribed to the CP's pursuit of an anti-fascist strategy (i.e. the popular front) determined by the Soviet Union's foreign policy requirements (which demanded the defence of the Show Trials and everything else the Soviet Union did) and not the needs of British workers. Failure to fully back the campaign against the BUF was another part of the explanation.¹⁴⁷ The CP's down-playing of the struggle for socialism and advocacy of a multi-party alliance with capitalists necessitated by the popular front campaign weakened its influence in most working class areas.¹⁴⁸ This is overly harsh on the CP and the popular front strategy. Murphy's argument implies that with a different strategy (presumably one similar to that which the party was pursuing before the popular front) the CP would, or could, have emerged as a significant force in the British working class. With the domination of the Labour Party on the left, there was very little room for the CP to emerge as a mass party. There had not been a significant left force in British politics other than the Labour Party before. The fact that the CP failed to change this was perhaps more a reflection of the political conditions in which it had to operate rather than on a particular strategy that it pursued for only a few years. It is reasonable to assume that whatever strategy the CP had employed 1935-39 it would have made little difference to its size and influence. Even the relatively mighty Labour Party and trade unions did not manage to change the government's foreign policy in this period, so the CP can be excused for failing on that count.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁵ Murphy also depicted the popular front in terms of a division between the Communist central leadership and the rank-and-file. He claimed that the 'golden era' of the CP was manifest in the activities of its members at local level against the BUF and in the 'Aid for-Spain movement' rather than in the popular front campaigns conducted by the national party that were generally seen as determined by Stalin.

Ibid., p444

¹⁴⁶ Though Murphy admitted that the failure was relative: the CP tripled its membership in the period.

Ibid., p25

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp2, 17-8

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p413

¹⁴⁹ Of course, the official movement did not really try and was criticised for this. The only real way of forcing the government to alter its foreign policy would have been to employ massive industrial direct action: a nation-wide strike until the government changed policy. However, the General Strike was an experience that labour movement leaders were never likely to want to repeat, certainly not for a 'political' end. Attempting to force what was perceived as a democratically elected government to change its policy was anathema to the majority of constitution-obsessed Labour leaders. As argued in chapter five, much of the regional membership did seem prepared to contemplate industrial (as well as political) action against the government's foreign policy.

Thus, Tom Buchanan was correct to state that, whilst consisting of broad coalitions of individuals and institutions, both within and without the labour movement and taking on the appearance of a popular front, 'Aid Spain' at local level was *not* a 'political project'.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, he added, the 'actual level of politicisation in these coalitions was very limited, not least due to the sheer, exhausting amount of practical work required' (which explains the reason why there were no large scale desertions from the Labour Party, despite disgust with Labour leaders' attitudes.)¹⁵¹ Clearly, there could have been politicisation despite the amount of work required if those in control of these campaigns had decided to present them in an explicitly political manner. The case of the Tyneside foodship supports Buchanan's assertion that: '[...] there is no evidence that humanitarian work for Spain on a Popular Front basis translated into effective political action'.¹⁵²

Another obvious aspect of the question of politicisation is the extent to which those involved in the foodship campaign became involved in Cripps' Petition campaign, which began as funds for the first Tyneside foodship were being collected. Certainly, at least one local Cripps supporter saw some significance in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Arthur Blenkinsop, announcing his support for the Cripps memorandum, pointed out that those who had campaigned with political and non-political organisations in the past few months on the Spanish foodship and other campaigns 'understand how effective such co-operation can be'.¹⁵³ Yet Blenkinsop's name did not figure prominently in the foodship campaign. Conversely, those names that did come up regarding the foodship campaign generally did not figure as Cripps supporters. As noted above, Anderson does not appear to have been involved with the Cripps campaign, and if he had it is likely that, as a high profile figure, this would have been noted in the sources. In fact, the only names that do come up in relation to both campaigns are those of the Lawthers and C.P. Trevelyan who, as left wingers, would be expected.

This point is particularly important regarding the role of Liberals in these activities. As discussed in chapter seven, apart from members of the CAPR, a highly unorthodox 'liberal' body, and those indeterminate number of Liberals who collected for the campaign as individuals, only one name of a prominent Liberal emerged: Raymond Jones (Liberal PPC, South Shields), like his Labour and National Liberal counterparts in South Shields, sent a message of support for the Tyneside foodship. Jones expressed pro-Republic anti-Franco views

¹⁵⁰ T. Buchanan, 'Britain's Popular Front?: Aid Spain and the British Labour Movement', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.31 (1991) p71

¹⁵¹ Ibid.,

¹⁵² 'Popular front basis' here presumably meant 'politically diverse'.

T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, p139

¹⁵³ *Tribune*, 27/1/39, p6

and attacked government foreign policy on the public platform in accordance with his party line, for example in April 1938. But he did not support any of the popular front initiatives. Other South Shields Liberals expressed degrees of sympathy with the Spanish Republic but did not become prominently involved in the foodship campaign, let alone the Cripps Petition campaign.¹⁵⁴

The arguments employed for the Tyneside foodship apply equally to many of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns. The campaign to provide funds for a Basque refugee hostel in Tynemouth looked like a popular front in terms of those involved but was consistently depicted as a purely humanitarian campaign, partly due to the wishes of the Basque government. The involvement of the Catholic church in housing large numbers of Basque children in the north east helped ensure that the politics of the conflict in Spain were not mentioned.¹⁵⁵ The committee organised to support the *Linaria* crewmen from the north east also took on the appearance of a popular front. Yet it, too, depicted its case in largely humanitarian terms. The crew defended themselves in court with the claim that they had not wished to be party to the murder of women and children by transporting nitrates to Franco's Spain. The logic of this argument was that they would equally have objected to taking the cargo to a Republic held port. Another argument they employed also suggested neutrality. The crew argued that they did not want to break non-intervention, again implying that had the cargo been for a Republican port, they would equally have objected.¹⁵⁶ The SMACs were more diverse in terms of composition and the way they framed their message. As noted in chapter one, some SMACs took on the appearance of united fronts and others, like Gateshead, appeared to be entirely official labour movement organisations. Some of these, such as the united front Blaydon SMAC, depicted the issue in political, pro-Republican terms. However, the four that appeared to be popular fronts in microcosm all depicted the issue in humanitarian terms. A Newcastle SMAC appeal in late October 1936, for example, called for medical supplies and clothes for 'the sufferers among the civilian population'.¹⁵⁷ Thus, the arguments

¹⁵⁴ *Shields Gazette*, 6/1/39, p1; 23/4/38, p1; 24/10/36, p5 and *North Mail*, 24/10/36, p5

¹⁵⁵ *North Mail*, 8/6/37, p7; 7/7/37, p7; 10/8/37, p2; 23/9/37, p7; *Shields Gazette*, 10/2/38, p5; 4/6/38, p4; *Gateshead Labour Herald*, 8/37, p2; 12/38, p1; *Sunday Sun*, 12/9/37, p3; 21/5/39, p13; *Durham Chronicle*, 3/6/38, p6; 10/6/38, p10; *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 26/5/39, p3; *Hexham Courant*, 18/3/39, p5; *Blyth News*, 17/3/38, p3; *Blaydon Courier*, 4/5/39, p3; Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrrh, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4/M/1); Len Edmondson Interview, 19/6/98 and D. Watson & J. Corcoran, *An Inspiring Example. The North East of England and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (McGuffin Press, 1996) pp73-84

¹⁵⁶ *Shields Gazette*, 22/2/37, p1; 13/3/37, p5; 20/3/37, p1; 19/4/37, p3; 27/4/37, p1; 8/6/37, p5; *New Leader*, 12/3/37, p6; 19/3/37, p1; 2/4/37, p3; *Shields News*, 12/10/36, p1; A. Robson, *Spike. Alec 'Spike' Robson 1895-1979. Class Fighter* (North Tyneside TUC, North Shields, 1987) pp11-12; D. Watson & J. Corcoran, op cit., pp15-23 and T. Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War*, pp210-2

¹⁵⁷ *Evening Chronicle*, 27/10/36, p13

Franco-supporting Catholics also neglected to mention who the aid was for. In a letter calling for donations to

used for the politicising nature of the Tyneside foodship apply equally to the popular front SMACs.¹⁵⁸

The only campaign that could not be properly de-politicised, no matter how much some tried, was the International Brigade Dependant's Aid. The campaign to support the IB volunteers, which was established nationally in February 1937, was limited in terms of those involved to the CP, with some support from the Labour left, the labour movement more generally in terms of donations to the fund, and CAPR members. There was no evidence of large numbers of the 'non-political' clergy or those to the right of the labour movement (apart from the CAPR) becoming involved in this campaign, unlike the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns, and this was no coincidence.¹⁵⁹ All the 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east that took on the appearance of popular fronts did so by sacrificing the politics of the situation in Spain and focusing on a humanitarian campaigning message.

James Klugman claimed that there were three levels of support for the Republic. The highest level was fighting in the International Brigade. There was a middle level of political action against non-intervention. The third level was one of 'extraordinarily broad' support for the Republic on the basis of foodships, medicines etc., which 'involved people of all political opinions, including many, many Tories, people of all religions. It was an extremely broad, humanitarian movement'.¹⁶⁰ Whilst there were only a few Tories involved in the north east, Klugman's characterisation of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns as a humanitarian rather than political movement is generally accurate. Close examination of the various 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east has revealed that all those that took on the appearance of popular fronts de-politicised their campaigning message. Yet some SMACs (none of which appeared to be

the *Catholic Universe's* Medical Fund for Spain, G. Keenan merely claimed that the funds would help the 'sick and wounded in Spain', not specifying on which side.

Newcastle Journal, 2/1/37, p4

¹⁵⁸ They were Newcastle, North Shields, Sunderland and Seaham. Durham SMAC, though emerging from a LBC circle, appears to have been populated solely by people from the official labour movement (see chapter one).

Newcastle Journal, 14/9/36, p14; 29/9/36, p4; *Daily Worker*, 15/9/36, p3; *New Leader*, 18/9/36, p4; *Shields News*, 13/10/36, p2; *Evening Chronicle*, 26/11/36, p13; *Sunday Sun*, 11/7/37, p3; *North Mail*, 29/9/36, p6; 5/5/37, p5; 2/6/37, p4; *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 16/7/37, p2; CP Central Committee Minutes, 10/11/36, Reel No.3 (MLHA) and Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18/2/85 (MML, BoxB-4M/1)

¹⁵⁹ Enid Atkinson (presumably the CAPR member) put her name to the appeal for the North East IB Dependant's Aid Committee, along with many prominent local Labour politicians. The presence of the names of Atkinson and councillor William Allan (presumably the Communist) gave the appeal the flavour of a popular front.

IB Memorial Meeting Programme (NRL, CPT184) and (MML, BoxB-4M/5a), Pegswood Lodge Minutes, 27/1/37 (NR0M, 4222/1/5), Ellington Lodge Minutes, 8/12/37, 12/10/38 and 1/2/39 (NR0M, 1331/6 and /7) and *North Mail*, 26/7/38, p5

¹⁶⁰ J. Klugman, 'The Crisis of the Thirties: a View From the Left' in J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies & C. Snee, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1979) p19

popular fronts) campaigned for medical supplies in political terms (i.e. that they would aid the Republic's struggle against fascism). Thus they can be seen as political campaigning organisations and represented a cross-over between Klugman's second and third levels of support for the Republic. Overall, the picture is one of a complex and diverse set of organisations, dealing with different aspects of the 'Aid Spain' cause and often in quite different ways. An appreciation of this complexity is vital to any understanding of this topic.

CONCLUSION

The north east appeared to be barren ground for the united and popular fronts and thus it proved to be. In fact, both the united and popular fronts drew less support and had less of an impact in the region than they did nationally. United front activity peaked in autumn 1936 with the Hunger March and anti-Means Test campaigns. The anti-Means Test demonstrations in mid-August 1936 were organised by the official labour movement, which invited Communists, for the first and only time, to attend. By the end of the month Communists were again an uninvited presence at such events. Even at its peak, official movement support for united front events was very limited, mostly to left-dominated organisations. Furthermore, theoretical support for the united front did not always translate into practical support for united front efforts. The most important example of this was the DMA, the most influential union in the region, which, although officially supporting Communist affiliation to Labour in 1936 and the united front in 1937 in principle, did not support practical united front action. Thus, DMA lodges voted emphatically against support for the 1936 Hunger March, for example. The DMA's distinctly lukewarm attitude was vital, as it was the largest and most significant united front supporter in the region. Apart from the DMA, only Durham DLP in the official movement supported CP affiliation and it, too, was not obviously involved in practical united front activity.

The Unity Campaign, despite its first impressive meeting in the region in March 1937, did nothing to improve the political atmosphere on the left or make those in Labour ranks more favourable to co-operation with Communists. The campaign itself drew in very few organisations and individuals from outside of the Labour left and support after its first spectacular meeting was small and disappointing. United front activity on domestic issues largely died out around the same time as the Unity Campaign started, indicating not that the campaign had killed it, but that the most promising moment for such a campaign had already passed. The NUWM nationally lost members and impetus after 1936 and the official movement, too, became increasingly preoccupied with events on the international stage and did little on domestic issues. The outbreak of the Spanish civil war had opened another arena for the left, stimulating some united and popular front activity. This was, however, confined to a few SMACs (which were largely populated by the same people who did everything else on the left in the region) and some Communist International Brigade (IB) members' involvement with Labour. Being an IB member allowed a handful of Communists access to Labour platforms and union officials that would otherwise have been denied them. However, on the very few

occasions that north east Communists spoke on Labour platforms, their party affiliation was unknown or un-stated.¹

The Unity Campaign in the north east failed: it provoked little in the way of praise or condemnation from mainstream Labour politicians suggesting that it was largely ignored. It also did nothing to improve relations between the regional CP and ILP, which were deteriorating nationally due to the situation in Republican Spain. The main reason for the Unity Campaign's failure was, as nationally, the lack of official labour movement support. Other factors contributed to its failure: that the three parties all had different and conflicting reasons for involvement and that there was opposition to involvement even within the participating parties, especially the Socialist League, from the outset. Sectarianism, which grew in the ILP and remained in the CP from an earlier period also did not help matters.

However, though it brought no obvious tangible benefits to the left, the Unity Campaign brought very few negative consequences either: there was little indication of demoralisation in the Labour left or the labour movement as a whole; already weak, the left was not significantly weakened further. If one of the effects had been, as Brockway argued, the weakening of Cripps' influence, this was a positive development for the left. Dalton may have been wrong about many things, but his gibe that Cripps had the 'political judgement of a flea' definitely had a basis in reality.² The demise of the Socialist League was also not a catastrophe in the region. Though relatively active in the north east, it was still a very small organisation dominated by middle class individuals with no palpable influence in the wider movement. Membership of the League allowed the NEC to easily identify and discipline dissidents, who would have been more influential had they agitated for left causes in looser alliances within the main body of the party. It was not surprising that the left wingers who had most success in stimulating united front activity, such as in Blaydon Labour Party, were those who held important positions in their party and were not members of the Socialist League at all. They also happened to be working class. The large decline in north east ILP membership may have been an effect of the campaign but this is by no means certain.

The United Peace Alliance campaign in 1938 also drew very little support in the north east and only held one conference in the region, in May. It suffered from the lack of a single organisational basis, but this was the least important of the reasons for its failure. Even without this organisation, it managed to stage a conference in the north east and presumably others

¹ At least the press reports did not state their party affiliations. Had they been explicitly billed as Communists, it is highly likely that the press reports would have made something of this, given their predilection for stories linking the labour movement with Communism.

² B. Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (Papermac, 1986) p262

could have been organised had there been strong support for the idea. In retrospect, the greatest window of opportunity for the popular front in the north east was around the time of the Munich crisis when Labour figures previously hostile to the popular front, such as Shinwell, appeared to change their minds. Even Dalton pursued cross party co-operation then, though this was not the same as a grass roots popular front campaign. Yet this window of opportunity was very short-lived, presumably for the same reasons that Eatwell posited for the national picture.³ Soon Shinwell and others who had momentarily flirted with the idea of a popular front returned to their support for the official movement and opposition to alliances with other parties. The TJPC, that held one of the biggest meetings Newcastle had seen on the international situation at the time of Munich, received a disappointing response to a conference it organised just a month later. Even then, the Labour faithful in the north east still seemed to see the solution to the international crisis and the government's foreign policy purely in terms of a Labour victory at the polls. Given the lack of evidence, little can be said of the unorganised masses that the popular front aimed to organise. Presumably public opinion in the north east was as volatile as it was elsewhere around this time, lurching between short bouts of intense interest and apathy.⁴

That the United Peace Alliance conference in May 1938 was twice the size of the Cripps campaign equivalent just nine months later indicated just how much of an overall failure Cripps' campaign was in the region. The popular front had lost two Newcastle DLPs by 1939 as well as several other labour movement organisations, though it did secure the support of Tynemouth and Blyth Labour Parties and Blyth TC which were important, if minor, successes. Compared to the national picture, too, Cripps' campaign was a total failure. Nationally, less than half of DLPs supported Cripps: in the north east it was one DLP out of 23. Like the 1937 Unity Campaign, the effects of Cripps' campaign were not notably counter-productive. The campaign's failure did not appear to alienate or disenchant left wingers or decrease the influence of the already relatively un-influential left within the movement. A handful of expulsions in Bishop Auckland and a martyred Trevelyan, who may, because of his martyrdom, have experienced an increase in his standing, was all that happened. On the plus side for Labour, Cripps' meetings increased the party's membership in places where it was relatively small.

The popular front in 1939 in the north east was largely the same, in terms of the numbers and actual people involved, as it was in 1936. The popular front failed even more

³ R. Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s', D.Phil. Thesis, Oxford (1975) pp364-8

spectacularly to secure Liberal support in the north east than it did with the labour movement. It was really only the CAPR in the north east that engaged in popular front style activity with the labour movement (largely the 'usual suspects' of the Labour left). In 1936 this activity took place primarily within the TJPC and then, later in 1936, Newcastle SMAC. Left Book Club groups also represented popular fronts in microcosm but their wider influence should not be overstated. In 1939, it was only the CAPR that supported calls for aid to the dependants of IB volunteers outside of the labour movement and only a CAPR member who supported the Cripps Petition Campaign. All this matched the national picture and is qualified by the relative unimportance of the CAPR. It was a very small organisation in the region and could only gain any kind of profile when it involved itself with other 'progressive' organisations. Other more orthodox Liberals were absent from these campaigns and evidence of Liberal pro-popular front sentiment in the north east was also largely non-existent. Of the two possible Conservative foreign policy rebels in the north east, Cruddas did not, in the end, rebel and Storey did not appear as a supporter of any of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, let alone the popular front. In fact, some north east Conservatives, to a greater or lesser extent, were favourably disposed to fascism. Many others seem to have been largely satisfied with their government's foreign policy, at least publicly. Some, like Cuthbert Headlam, eventually realised that Nazism was not very pleasant but, curiously, still seemed to think Franco was not all bad. If Headlam was representative of majority Conservative rank-and-file opinion, regionally as well as nationally, then it was very unlikely that any Conservatives would have been potential popular front supporters. Headlam disliked appeasement by the time of Munich but did not blame Chamberlain for the policy and saw no alternative to it. Denouncing Chamberlain's predecessors, the Labour Party and pacifists for Britain's malaise, Headlam certainly did not look to Macmillan's '1931 in reverse'.⁵

However, a few Liberals were involved, either as individuals collecting for, or as patrons of, the Tyneside foodship. This campaign ran concurrently with Cripps' campaign and was the largest, most energetic and the most significant 'Aid Spain' campaign, in terms of size and diversity, that the region saw in this period. Yet this campaign cannot be regarded as a political one, as politics were eschewed throughout, even by those who approached the Spanish conflict from a left political perspective. Of course, many Liberals involved could have been acting out of political motivation: their party did, after all, support the Republic and the popular front. But those non-political or Conservative individuals involved were acting out of

⁴ C. Cook & J. Ramsden, *By Elections in British Politics* (UCL Press, 1997) pp112-129

⁵ B. Pimlott, *op cit.*, p260

humanitarian concerns and thus the political impact of the campaign on those involved in it and those donating to it was negligible. The Tyneside foodship was the most graphic illustration of the point that Spain acted more as a distraction from the united and popular fronts than it did a stimulus to them.

This was the rub for the CP at the time and for Communist historians since. These supposedly popular fronts around the issue of Spain could only be constructed at local level if politics were deliberately removed from the equation. Consequently, the Communists involved, obliged not to talk about politics, were largely invisible. This secured the involvement of the non-political and Conservatives to some extent but it did nothing for the CP. The north east is a particularly extreme example of how, in a relatively 'backward' area for the CP, it could only make a small amount of headway in increasing its size and influence with the popular front strategy. At the time that the apparently popular front foodship campaign was occurring, north east CP membership had plateaued and even slightly dropped as the popular front began running 'out of steam'.⁶ The act of creating a supposedly popular front around Spain necessitated the removal of politics. Yet without politics, at the least an anti-fascist, anti-appeasement viewpoint, the popular front was meaningless. The experience of the CP in the north east 1936-1939 certainly does not suggest that the popular front period was the 'the most fruitful period in the history of the British left and of the Communist Party in particular'.⁷ Of course, the north east CP, like its West Yorkshire counterpart, was operating in difficult conditions, given the strong traditional labourism of the region.⁸ What can be said though is that the popular front tactic did not seem to bring many rewards for the party. In mid-1938, after five years of the united and popular fronts, regional party membership was still far less than that of the late twenties. The popular front tactic seems to have been interpreted in many different ways both at the time and subsequently. But if the Tyneside foodship and other 'de-politicised' 'Aid Spain' campaigns were an example of the tactic in action, then it clearly did not achieve what its advocates, at the time and subsequently, claimed was intended.

The weakness of the left outside of the Labour Party in the region was important in explaining the failure of both the united and popular fronts. As Jupp pointed out, it was only in areas where socialist minorities already had an established following (Scotland, South Wales,

⁶ A. Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *Historical Journal*, Vol.43, No.3 (2000) p783

⁷ J. Fyrth, 'Introduction: In the Thirties', in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1985) p15

⁸ D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University (1999) p409

and the poorest parts of London) that there was sympathy with a radical socialist message.⁹ Both the ILP and CP were, even by their own standards, small and un-influential in the north east. It is salutary to note that the most important and influential Communists in the region were the ones who kept their true party affiliation hidden. The most important example was Tom Aisbitt, prime mover in Newcastle TC, the key left-controlled industrial organisation in the region which was prominent in all united and popular front activity in this period. Potentially, Communist influence in the NEFTC was large, but Newcastle TC's numerical strength was not reflected in overwhelming voting power on the NEFTC executive. Had Newcastle TC had this voting potency, it is almost certain that there would have been far more high-level disputes within the NEFTC. Apart from Aisbitt, there were very few other important crypto-Communists.

Nevertheless, there were a few people within the Labour Party who, though probably not card-carrying members, shared the CP's politics. This handful of active and committed 'fellow travellers', backed by an indeterminate but undoubtedly small number of people, formed the mainstay of support for the united and popular front projects within the official labour movement. Thus, most labour movement organisations that supported the united and/or popular fronts did so because they were under left wing control, and thus ideologically committed to the ideas, rather than because they stood to gain practically. Probably the single most important figure in this context was Henry Bolton, a miner from the 'Little Moscow' village of Chopwell who was involved in every aspect of left wing activity in this period.¹⁰ Slightly less prominent was fellow Chopwell resident Steve Lawther, whose activity was more concentrated in the Blaydon area. The same can be said of Jim Stephenson, another left wing Blaydon miner. In addition, there was a handful of other individuals scattered around the region: Andy Lawther in Spen, Will Pearson in South Shields and George Harvey at Follonsby, for examples. Yet, it was only in Blaydon Labour Party that the left really held sway and thus Blaydon produced the most evidence of united and popular front activity in the period. Not only did the same Blaydon left wingers organise in the Socialist Sunday School, the Blaydon SMAC and other united and popular front agitation, they also played leading roles in this activity throughout the north east. However, even in Blaydon the left was not all-powerful: it

⁹ J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (Frank Cass, 1982) p179

¹⁰ In April 1942, Bolton admitted that he had been a CP member for a few months in 1928. In practice it is of course very difficult to determine whether a Labour Party member actually had a CP card or merely agreed with CP policy. This is not a great problem as there was little difference in the practice. L.H. Mates, 'From Revolutionary to Reactionary: The Life of Will Lawther', M.A. Thesis, Newcastle University (1996) p57

was weak in Blaydon TC, run by the Catholic and strongly anti-Communist Edward Colgan.¹¹ The controversy over the Socialist Sunday School in autumn 1936 revealed that even the Blaydon Labour left did not have it all its own way.

The attitude of the majority towards Communism offers another element of the explanation for the lack of support the united and popular fronts received from the ranks of the official labour movement. Generally, official Labour in the north east was indifferent to Communists; it did not make any special effort to exclude them nor to include or organise with them. Presumably, many in the regional labour movement shared the theoretical opposition to Communism that was so frequently revealed by their national leaders. However, this opposition was very rarely expressed openly by north east labour movement figures in the late thirties. There is no evidence that the Show Trials in Russia strengthened this opposition, as it did in West Yorkshire, for example. Nor did Trotskyist attitudes play an important part in opposition to the CP. Even the supposed Trotskyists in South Shields did not use the Show Trials against the Stalinists in 1938. But Labour did, on occasion, openly reject Communist overtures. At the time of local elections, some Labour Parties remained silent about Communist offers of support and others chose openly to repudiate these offers. Labour leaders in the region largely thought that being seen to accept Communist support would lose them votes, perhaps because they knew that the regional press would make the most of any overt co-operation at the polls. Certainly, on the one occasion in the period when the official movement invited the CP to attend its anti-Means Test demonstrations, in mid-August 1936, the Conservatives attempted to discredit Labour in the aftermath. Of course, north east Labour openly and truthfully rejected the insinuation that it supported the united front, but some damage may have been done to the party for no obvious gain. The fact that these seem to have been the only times that Labour openly repudiated co-operation with Communists suggests that generally Communists were not seen as sufficient a threat to warrant denunciation. The CP and ILP were so small in the region that they had very little to offer practically. Communists perhaps had a decisive influence electorally speaking in one ward in the whole of the region: Croft ward in Blyth. Blyth council was Labour-dominated anyway and thus one ward was not essential for the party. However, even where Labour was weak, Tynemouth for example, there was still no obvious desire to organise with Communists. In fact, the tensions evident in many localities in the period revealed that, even where control of a council was in jeopardy, the

¹¹ It was probably just as well for the cause of internal labour movement unity that most miners' lodges stubbornly refused to have anything to do with their local trades councils. More extensive involvement of miners' lodges in Blaydon TC would surely have resulted in direct conflict between Colgan and Bolton et al (though in Blaydon, perhaps the left was more likely to have emerged the victor).

official labour movement still divided amongst itself regardless. Given this, Labour was never going to support co-operation with Communists on solely practical grounds. A strong initiative from the national leadership or an overwhelming ideological desire at grass roots for the united or popular fronts was necessary for success, but neither was forthcoming. There were rare occasions when the official movement did co-operate with Communists, for example, the North Shields trawlermen's strike in January 1937, which brought a Communist from outside the industry in to lead. Yet this seemed to bring no obvious benefits to Communists in the area and was the result of the strikers' desperation as they had been abandoned by the TGWU. This event merely represented a recognition that Communists could be good trade unionists, rather than support for the Communist programme. Likewise, the DMA regularly elected Cripps a speaker at its gala. Cripps may have interpreted this as DMA support for his political projects, but, if he did, he discovered in 1939 that he was sorely mistaken.

Similar considerations applied to the labour movement's association with Liberals in the popular front. Liberalism, or at least Liberalism independent of the National Government, was weak in the north east partly because the party had been almost completely eclipsed by Labour by the thirties. Labour obviously did not need an alliance with independent Liberals in the vast majority of cases and was thus content to eschew co-operation with them. The very fact that Labour had so completely replaced the Liberals meant that support for co-operation with them was very small. The 'independent' Liberals had little to offer practically in terms of votes and could not guarantee they could deliver their vote to Labour in the event of a pact anyway. In fact, Liberals may not even have secured their vote for a *Liberal* candidate in a pact with Labour. Generally speaking, the presence of independent Liberal candidates in the north east helped Labour as they largely took votes from Conservatives (or National Liberals who were Conservatives in all but name). The zeal of the convert ensured Labour remained averse to co-operation with Liberals. Labour opposition was also fuelled by the fear that an alliance would prompt a Liberal revival, which could have had devastating results in an area that was formerly Liberal-dominated. Labour differed with Liberals over domestic policies and the fact that the popular front programme was largely a radical Liberal manifesto based on foreign policy and neglecting domestic issues meant that it had little appeal to some elements of Labour support, especially in an area where unemployment remained a significant problem.¹² However, though the national leadership remained equivocal on Spain, Labour in the north east did campaign extensively on international issues in the late thirties, to the detriment of

campaigns on domestic issues. Activity on Spain served, if anything, as a distraction from the united and popular front campaigns and did not feed them. This can best be illustrated by the fact that in 1938 every single north east DLP and the miners unions called for a national labour movement conference on the international situation, but only two DLPs supported the popular front. Most north east labour movement activists supported the Spanish Republic and found adequate outlets for their support in activities within their own DLPs, most of which were less cautious about offending Catholics than was the national leadership, and hence more eager to act.

One aspect of internal labour movement division that was not as significant as it was in some other areas of Britain was that regarding Catholic attitudes. Catholics were generally not alienated by the labour movement's support for the Spanish Republic in the region, despite their church's depiction of the conflict as Christianity versus Communist atheism. Labour movement Catholics' general acceptance of their party's depiction of the conflict in Spain as democracy versus fascism can be explained by the peculiarly tolerant environment the north east provided for the first migrant Irish Catholics. This enabled them and their descendants to become easily incorporated into the wider social and political environment and thus less inclined to identify with and accept everything they were told from the pulpit. Despite this, labour movement Catholics remained opposed to Communism, which was regarded as atheist, and thus provided a barrier to co-operation with Communists in the united and popular fronts. In the north east, it was quite possible for Catholics to be strong Republic supporters whilst maintaining implacable opposition to Communism. However, even where Catholics were particularly numerous, they could not prevent labour movement organisations from supporting Communist projects if the majority of non-Catholics favoured such policies. Thus Jarrow LP&TC, despite having a very large proportion of Catholic members, consistently supported association with Communists in the united and popular fronts. Though the Catholicism of some in the labour movement gave an extra dimension to their anti-Communism, had only Catholics been anti-Communist, they would not have been able to resist the united front. Fortunately for Catholics, their attitude towards Communism coincided with that of majority in the north east labour movement.

The intervention of national leaderships also helped ensure that official labour movement organisations did not co-operate with Communists. Thus the TUC in early 1936 corresponded with Felling TC which was organising with the NUWM. The activity ceased with

¹² The ILP's case against the popular front, as it was an alliance with capitalist parties, may have exercised some influence on attitudes in the Labour Party, particularly over those such as Jim Stephenson who had been

this intervention, though even Felling TC stated that it did not support Communism but did applaud activity against the Means Test. Generally, though, there is little evidence of national intervention blocking regional united front activity. Citrine kept an eye on potential trouble makers, like Ellen Wilkinson, and presumably also liked to scrutinise the activities of all affiliated organisations, but there were limits to what he could do. The NEC appears to have been less keen on disciplining dissidents in the region: its only obvious victim was Trevelyan in 1939, who was a nationally important figure who refused to back down on Cripps despite NEC threats. Regionally, only Bishop Auckland DLP took a determined stand against dissent and expelled a handful of members in 1937 and 1939 for involvement in the Unity and Petition Campaigns. Overall, an outstanding feature of the north east labour movement in this period was its tolerance of internal dissent, which was far greater than that of the national leadership.

Indeed, the movement, a diverse coalition of people of different social classes and with widely differing political perspectives had to be tolerant to survive. The complex structure of the movement at grass roots level did not make for internal harmony and there were many different rivalries that provoked conflict. Friction occurred between the industrial and political wings of the movement manifest in struggles between, for example, County Durham Labour Party and its paymasters, the DMA. There was also conflict within parties between the different trade union and political factions. Religion divided the party too, though Catholics in this period only split the party over domestic issues that directly affected their own lives such as birth control and education. These extensive internal divisions manifest in the official labour movement in the late thirties suggest that a degree of insularity, introversion and complacency characterised the attitudes of some within it. This meant that an appeal to co-operate with other parties necessitated by the urgent requirement of removing the government and enacting policies which aimed to avert war was unlikely to be heard by those embroiled in their own parochial disputes. This characteristic should not be over-emphasised, however, as the labour movement in general did actively campaign on Spain and other international issues.

Furthermore, there was, in the anatomy of the labour movement, a more important implication: one of the reasons a popular front was not necessary was that the labour movement, in some senses, already represented a popular front. An alliance of disparate individuals and organisations, the labour movement already had a programme that called for a vigorous opposition to the fascist powers. Thus popular front supporters could simply join Labour, which would avoid the complex wrangling, bitterness and distrust involved in forming and sustaining a pact with other parties. This general tolerance was also important in

minimising potential damage that these left campaigns could cause. For example, the DMA refused to allow divisive debate or recriminations to occur over Lawther and Watson's support for Cripps in 1939. Like the important labour movement Catholics, Lawther and Watson knew how far to take their political stand before retreating; and even those who did not relent, such as Wilkes, were not necessarily punished. Likewise, the NEFTC ensured damage resulting from the Spain and Catholic controversy was minimised. As a consequence there was little bitterness or recrimination within the movement in the aftermath of these campaigns. General tolerance was a wise policy that maintained the relative cohesiveness of a complex and heterogeneous movement. It ensured that the regional labour movement was remarkably insulated against the potentially damaging effects of the united and popular front campaigns.

Another important part of the explanation for the lack of labour movement support for the united and popular fronts was the loyalty that the movement retained to the movement as a whole, embodied by the national leadership. In order for discipline from the national leadership to work, there had to be a large degree of loyalty. However, loyalty did not mean blind obedience and support for everything that the leadership said or did. Thus, for example, there is evidence of some disquiet at the leadership's implementation of the Black Circulars in the early thirties. By 1938 dissatisfaction with the national leadership was manifest in the overwhelming support in the region for a national conference on the international situation. This was despite the fact that Labour had moved nationally to a position of greater support for the Spanish Republic. The importance of this regional disquiet was that it reflected badly on the popular front, which drew hardly any support from this widespread disaffection. Ultimately, loyalty rested on the widespread feeling that the labour movement, despite its defects and, at times, problematic and wrong-headed leadership, still represented the best way of articulating the political desires of the majority of its members. In 1938, the north east labour movement strongly desired a movement-wide discussion on the issues and a more effective mobilisation of the movement's resources which, it thought, would be sufficient to bring salvation in the form of a Labour government, unimpaired by alliances to the right or left. Even when the national leadership declined to act on these calls, the regional movement did not rebel, presumably thinking that its national organisation still provided the solution, despite the leadership's failures.

North east workers had demonstrated as recently as 1926 that their loyalty to the movement did not preclude a militant attitude and a high degree of self-organisation.¹³ This attitude actually frightened the Labour leadership, who would have preferred a pliant and languid working class membership who let them get on with the job of leading unhindered. Equally worrying to national leaders, partly because of their experience of the General Strike, was the spectre of actively mobilising their membership.¹⁴ Thus, the refusal to allow a national conference on the international situation in 1938 had more to do with fear of what their own membership wanted to do with the movement rather than fear of the popular front. The north east reveals that the rank-and-file sometimes desired stronger and more militant action than the leadership, but that there was nowhere to go when the leadership simply refused to act. That the national leadership's unwillingness to act did not throw the north east labour movement into the hands of the popular front reveals just how inadequate or irrelevant a strategy it was perceived to be in the region. In fact, the popular front theoretically demanded a toning-down of militancy in order to appeal to Liberals, and this was a further reason why it struck no chord in a section of the official labour movement that actually supported industrial direct action for political ends in 1938. The existence of extensive support for industrial direct action for political ends forces a reassessment of the extent to which the north east labour movement can be characterised as right wing and moderate. At times, and on certain issues, the regional labour movement was well to the left of the national Labour leadership (as well as, in this case, the CP national leadership).

Loyalty to principles played a part in the popular front's failure to attract Liberal support. Although the popular front programme appealed to a radical Liberal foreign policy agenda, this was insufficient to overcome the more fundamental ideological differences that largely characterised north east Liberal attitudes. Fundamentally, Liberals generally co-operated with Conservatives for local elections to counter the 'socialist' threat in the years after the threat first became apparent in 1918. Thus, by 1936, Liberals had been in anti-socialist Moderate pacts with Conservatives for many years. Like Labour, Liberals opposed Communism, but they regarded Labour as socialist and thus a natural ally of Communists and

¹³ See A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (Occasional Papers in Economic and Social History, No.3, University of Hull, Hull, 1970) as well as the proliferation of articles in numbers of *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*.

Mason commented (p103) that a notable feature of the General Strike in the north east was the considerable amount of violence, manifest in several clashes with the police (though, of course, violence does not necessarily indicate militancy).

¹⁴ See anarcho-syndicalist (and, incidentally, Geordie) Tom Brown's pamphlet on the General Strike. T. Brown, 'The British General Strike, 1926' in T. Brown, *Tom Brown's Syndicalism* (Phoenix Press, 1990) pp20-32

enemy of those (such as themselves and Conservatives), who supported capitalism. A programme based solely on foreign policy was going to have great problems overcoming these fundamental ideological differences. Liberals were insignificant in most of the north east anyway, and where they were a force, such as in Tynemouth, they attempted to establish better pacts with Conservatives rather than with Labour. In Tynemouth, Liberals were strong enough to retain a degree of independence, though the moves they made to form better electoral alliances were always with Conservatives and aimed at combating Socialists and Communists, who they regarded as a combined threat despite the fact that Labour consistently refused to co-operate with Communists in the town. Liberals feared that an alliance with Labour would lead to their permanent eclipse, the very reverse of Labour fears. Either of these scenarios could have been true, depending on precisely how a popular front pact was worked. The right wing nature of Liberalism in the north east was also reflected in the fact that the National Liberal Party was a far stronger force in the area than its 'independent' counterpart. Already in an alliance with Conservatives at local and national level, National Liberals would also be almost impossible to attract to a popular front alliance with Labour, especially given that none of their leading figures in the region expressed any opposition to the government's appeasement policies. Liberal voters, too, appeared to choose the Conservatives rather than Labour if their party did not field a candidate. It was ironic that those who apparently attached the most importance to ideology, Labour left wingers, seemed to have no problems with class collaboration, especially with the CAPR, a group established by Lloyd George who was infamous for betraying miners on the Sankey report and for his positive comments about Hitler in 1936. In contrast, Liberals, not known for being especially dogmatic, remained far truer to their ideology.

Given all these considerations, the failure of the united and popular fronts in the north east cannot be attributed to the specific failings and problems of particular campaigns. In other words, it would be wrong to attribute Cripps' failure in 1939 to the fact that he was arrogant, wrote a very flawed popular front programme, presented it in a manner that revealed a dearth of tactical acumen and operated a weak and disorganised organisation, though all these observations are valid. Cripps' timing was bad. As with the Unity Campaign, the Cripps campaign came too late. However, even had all these specific factors not applied to Cripps' campaign, there is little doubt that the popular front would not have been significantly more successful in an area like the north east. As for the putative informal popular front based around the 'Aid Spain' campaigns and typified in the north east by the Tyneside foodship campaign, this was nothing more than an illusion. If these humanitarian campaigns, almost

completely bleached of politics of even the faintest hue, were the 'closest thing to a popular front in Britain', the case of the north east leads to the inevitable conclusion that a British popular front was never a viable project in the thirties.¹⁵ If the 1945 Labour election victory can be seen, as Fyrth claimed, as at least a partial victory for the popular front then most of the headway the project made must have occurred after the outbreak of the very war the strategy was invented to avoid.¹⁶

¹⁵ J. Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain* (Lawrence & Wishart, 1986) p22

¹⁶ J. Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-39', *History Workshop Journal*, Vol.35 (1993) pp162-163

This was claimed by Andrew Thorpe who wrote that the consequences of the Second World War produced 'the factors which enabled Labour to win parliamentary majorities'.

A. Thorpe, *The British General Election of 1931* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991) p273

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