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MY EARLY DAYS IN THE TROTSKYIST MOVEMENT

Within a few months of my first Leeds Group meeting I went to a northern aggregate meeting in Manchester. Attending were comrades from Newcastle, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. It was my first meeting with these comrades. Some of the names I remember are Jim Allen, Joe Ryan, Peter Kerrigan, and Jim Swan; there were many more and most of them were industrial workers.

From the day I first made contact with the Group our main activity was to organise against Stalinism and the right wing of the Labour Party. I think it is true to say that in my experience work in the unions was on the agenda only as much as it exposed the trade union and Labour Party right wing politically, as well as the Stalinists. In this way we somehow saw ourselves as presenting the Trotskyists as an alternative leadership for the working class. This does not mean that Trotskyists did not take part in and indeed lead struggles in the working class. We did just that, before, during and after the second world war. But how did we see our participation in these struggles? Was it a way of forging an alternative leadership from the struggles that take place at the very heart of capitalism? Or was it looked upon simply as a way of exposing the present leaders and posing the leadership issue as one of proving to the working class that the social-democratic and Stalinist leadership in the workers' movement was wrong and the way forward was to join the Trotskyist Fourth International? Just a step away from saying

‘take your pick and if you don’t pick us then you get the leadership you deserve’.

I joined the Group at the back end of the faction struggle with Pablo. Michel Pablo was a Greek comrade who foresaw centuries of Stalinism. In line with this he had a policy of collaborating closely with the Communist Party. While the politics of that struggle were not in the forefront of my mind it was obviously in the forefront of the minds of those comrades who had been involved in that struggle. But some comrades could not put it in perspective in our relationship with the working class. At a monthly delegate meeting of the Leeds Trades Council a discussion was taking place on some aspect of policy regarding the relationship of the Trades Council to a campaign launched by the electricians’ union (ETU) on wages. I saw that John Archer had indicated that he wanted to speak. When the chair, Councillor Jones (a very just and efficient chair), called on him to speak, our late Comrade John Walls whispered, ‘Oh dear . . .’ John Archer then proceeded to give the delegates of the Leeds Trades Council a lecture on Pabloism.

I was so horrified and embarrassed that at our next Group branch meeting I reported that I had moved a resolution at my union branch on the question of the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union (the Blue Union) versus the Transport and General Workers’ Union. It was to be forwarded to the Trades Council and to the Leeds City Labour Party delegate meeting. I was to move the resolution on behalf of my union branch at both of these meetings. I proceeded to explain to the meeting why I thought it wrong for Comrade Archer to make the contribution he had made at the last Trades Council meeting. I then suggested that he should not make a contribution on my resolution at either of the meetings. At the end of the meeting John left more quickly than usual and the other comrades explained to me that no one had ever dared speak to John Archer in such terms before. Apparently in my innocence I had offended him and damaged his ego.

In 1955 the district office of my union decided to organise a weekend school at Scarborough. There were to be two lectures spread over the weekend to be given by a lecturer from the Workers’ Educational Association. Number one was to be the decline in

strikes in the USA since 1945 and the reasons why. Number two, why workers in the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union would never rise against the regime.

Our comrades in the American section produced a weekly paper the *Militant*. The fact that we had comrades in the USA producing a weekly paper had quite an impression on me. I was always pleased to receive the latest issues and found it a great advantage to have information from reading the *Militant*. I was able to point out at the first session that big class actions were still taking place in the USA, such as the big strike at the Westinghouse Plant, and to list strikes that were taking place where the National Guard had been called out. That meant guns against the pickets. The lecturer's line was that all that had ended in America, that peace in Europe (the end of the war) had been followed by peace between the unions and the bosses. Because of this the people of America had benefited. Shades of MRA (Moral Re-Armament), a very rich organisation financed by employers. Shop stewards and the like were wined and dined in luxury and educated to believe that employers and employees should live in harmony for the betterment of industry. At the break I produced copies of the *Militant* that carried these stories for those attending the weekend school to read. The district secretary pulled me on one side and said that it was wrong of me to embarrass the lecturer like this: 'We are here to learn from him.' After the break we had a very lively discussion. At the end of the first day I told our lecturer that I was looking forward to tomorrow's session. Our educator approached the working class in the Soviet Union in the same subjective impressionist way. I remember him clearly saying you have to believe what you see. In the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc you had a regime that had such a grip on the working class that it would never again be able to defend itself. All protest and strike action was now out of the question. My contribution was basically to say that the history of the struggle of the working class throughout the world showed that it had strength so great that it would rise against its oppressors. And that included the Soviet bloc. This school took place before the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at which Krushchev's speech denounced Stalin, and before Poznan and the Hungarian

uprising. Following these events I tried to contact the lecturer without success. In retrospect I think my reason for wanting to contact him was for subjective reasons. I just wanted to say 'I told you so'. I certainly went out of my way to remind the Communist Party members of the discussion at the school. The only defence they could put up at the school was: 'It's all lies. It's Western imperialist propaganda.'

One hot sunny day I suggested to Ray and Paula that we pop up to the local for a pint. A couple of friends of mine that worked at the Temple Newsam pit were in there. A family member of theirs, some long lost uncle or something, was there from America and had looked them up. We drank our first pint listening to him telling everyone how stupid we all must be to fall for the idea of 'communistic medicine'. On top of that he found out that he had two relatives working in a communistic coal mine. He was a real loud mouth. His family was extremely embarrassed. Then he started on the trade unions. The turning point was when after all this he said, 'Why don't you two lads come back to America with me? It's the land of the free.' I did try to be nice to him and explain to him the benefits of the National Health Service and other socialist principles. I then excused myself and went home to get myself some facts on the question of freedom in the USA. I was soon back and he was still raving on. I outlined to him some of the recent events in America, giving dates and places where the state had tried to force freedom on to workers by using armed troops and police. He was not pleased. 'Just who are you boy?' I told him that I was the Labour Party candidate in the election that was just taking place. 'And where do you get this information from?' With that I pulled out a copy of the *Militant*. He obviously recognised the paper and became very angry. With that he said, 'I have travelled all this way and the first pub I go in I meet a *Trot!*' At this point the landlord suggested that it would be a good idea to drink up and go.

I cannot speak for everyone in the Group, but in 1954-1955, I thought that Trotskyism had the answers. I could support the Bolshevik revolution and speak of Lenin and Trotsky in the same breath, support the gains of the Russian Revolution while denouncing Stalin at the same time. We were in a position that

made it possible to defend the Soviet Union from a principled position. But in retrospect I feel now that being a Trotskyist made it possible for me to be a communist without having to embrace the stigma of Stalinism. Did we embrace this as a kind of protective ring around us, which was at the same time preventing us from getting out? There were exceptions when we felt that we were on safe ground, such as 1956, when it was possible for us to step outside.

Following the closing down of the *Socialist Outlook* (our paper at this time) we worked through the columns of the Bevanite paper *Tribune*. This paper was no stranger to me as I had been an avid reader for about three years before joining the Group. In fact it was through reading an ad in *Tribune* that I became aware of the existence of *Keep Left*, the Group's paper inside the Labour Party. This paper went from being a duplicated sheet to a printed broadsheet. In the 1960s it became very influential in the youth sections, which scared the living daylights out of the Labour Party. Because of this the Labour Party decided to produce its own youth paper, *Advance*, to counter the popularity of *Keep Left*.

A prize was to be presented at the annual conference to the Young Socialist branch with the largest circulation. The winning branch was duly called to the platform to receive their prize and accolades from the Labour Party leadership. The secretary of the branch was asked to explain for the benefit of all the other youth branches how they were able to have such a large circulation. To rapturous applause and laughter he told them that they put a copy of *Advance* into every *Keep Left* sold. A few years later we won a majority of seats on the national committee of the Young Socialists. But I will leave that campaign and the work of the Labour Party 'dirty tricks' department for later.

In 1955 we were still working hard in the Labour Party. Wherever it was possible we took on tasks of being ward secretaries, youth officers (I held this post in the East Leeds constituency), local council candidates, election agents, etc. The most outstanding success in Leeds was when one of our members, Ron Sedler, with Mary Archer as his agent, took the Harehills ward seat from the Tories, who had held it for years. We had our own well-thought-out policies with housing and rents the main plank in the platform. Both council and

private landlords were targeted. Halls were filled for public meetings – unheard of in other wards. The Tories circulated a leaflet attacking Ron and Mary and the Harehills ward Labour Party, saying that Ron was not a proper Labour Party candidate. They called on the Labour Party to expel him and close the ward. No doubt the Labour Party would have liked to do this but it was not that easy in those days. The Labour Party election victory had been a resounding success and left the bureaucrats very angry and embarrassed. We continued our work, increasing our delegates to Labour Party constituencies and the Leeds City Labour Party. We also made a lot of progress getting candidates from trade union branches and the Labour Party to the Leeds Trades Union Council.

Then came the huge events of 1956, a year to remember: the Suez Canal crisis, Khrushchev's speech at the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Twentieth Congress denouncing Stalin, and then the sending in of Soviet troops and tanks against the Hungarian workers.

Our activity around the Suez crisis was to defend the right of Egypt to nationalise the canal. It was easy to get resolutions passed throughout the labour movement opposing the invasion by Britain in the Canal Zone. There was a Conservative government with Eden as the prime minister. But there were always those who opposed the invasion but did not support the nationalisation of the canal. We got the arguments 'we built it so it is ours' and 'the Arabs will not be able to administer it properly'.

The Labour Party called for demonstrations throughout Britain. These were to be held on a Sunday. On the Saturday we sold *Tribune* in Briggate and campaigned for the Leeds demonstration. On this particular weekend I had been invited on the Saturday to the wedding of friends of mine, Danny Keneally, the son of a Leeds councillor, and Helen Murray, also the daughter of a Leeds councillor and Hugh Gaitskell's election agent. Danny and Helen had arranged the seating so that a Communist Party friend of his and I were to sit on either side of Hugh Gaitskell, the leader of Her Majesty's loyal opposition. Danny was to make some comment about this during his speech. He was unable to do this as neither Gaitskell nor I could attend because of the crisis. I called into the register office

to see them and give them their gift. Both of Helen's parents were very angry that I had put politics before the wedding. Not with Gaitskell: me.

After the reception Danny and Helen came to Briggate, where we were campaigning, to give us their support. Then off they went for their honeymoon, which started with taking part in the London demonstration. All our contingents throughout Britain carried placards opposing the war and supporting the nationalisation of the canal.

It was a cold February evening. I was walking along Vicar Lane, Leeds when passing the market entrance I spotted the placard of a newspaper vendor of the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. It read 'Khrushchev denounces Stalin in secret speech'. I must have said something out loud as a couple of passers by thought that I was talking to them. Khrushchev had raised the question of opponents of Stalin being executed, tortured, sent to labour camps or simply disappearing. To question the infamous Moscow Trials resulted in arrest or worse.

When we had raised these questions previously with Communist Party members we always understood the betrayals of Stalin. We were not anti-Soviets opposing Stalin; we were communists opposing the betrayals of the Stalinist bureaucracy and their representatives in the world's Communist Parties. But as far as they were concerned the truth always came from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and in turn was passed on to the membership. Within two hours of seeing the placard I was at a meeting of the Leeds branch called for the sole purpose of discussing this issue. I knew from previous discussions with John and Mary Archer and Lance Lake just how difficult it had been for Trotskyists before and during the war, physically being thrown out of meetings and branded as fascists by the Communist Party and their many fellow travellers in the Labour Party. The CP judged you by your attitude to the line that came out of the Kremlin.

The three of them had waited a long time for a break like this so it was understandable that they were a little excited at the news. But the two who were sitting on the edge of their seats just aching

for clocking-on time the following morning were John Walls, AEU (engineering union) convenor of stewards at George Mann's factory, and me from John Barran's clothing factory. Jack Gale was in a similar position, as there were two Communist Party teachers at the school where he taught. We were strongly advised not to go charging in shouting 'I told you so'. We had to remember that this particular discussion was going to be around for a very long time. We had a certain knowledge of the origins of Stalinism and the history of the Russian Revolution. In addition to this we knew what the CP members had been lied to about – the communist opposition to the Stalinist regime and the crimes of Stalin. The work that we had already done in the YCL and CP and the contacts that we had already made would give us a good start for future developments. So we went into our places of work knowing that we had to keep calm and let things unfold and not be pushy. Difficult, but discipline prevailed.

A few days before I had loaned a CP fellow traveller my copy of Lenin's *Testament*. In this Lenin warns against Stalin and writes in favour of Trotsky. The CP line had always been that this was a forgery. But now, as well as the other revelations, Khrushchev admitted the testament's authenticity.

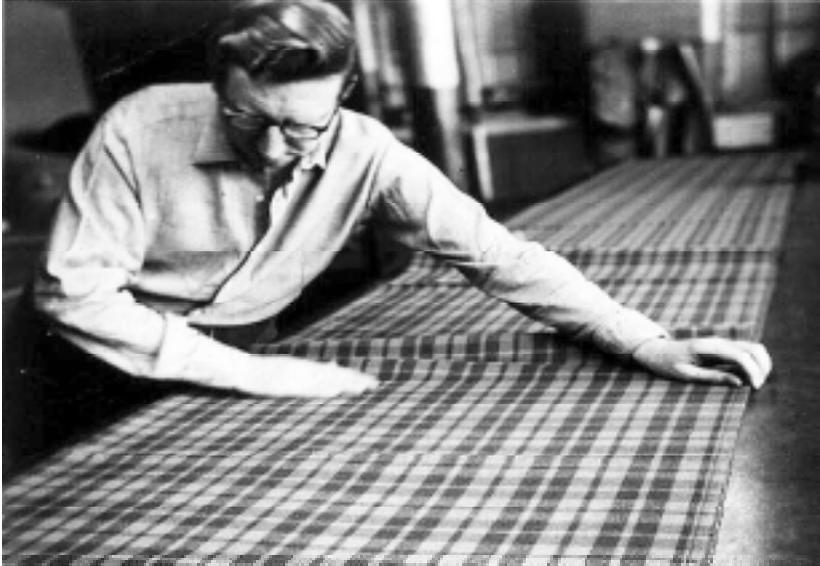
I arrived at work, went into the cutting room, clocked on, went to my bench, folded up my coat in its cover and put it under my bench. I can see all this as though it was yesterday. Les Dixon as usual had brought in the *Daily Worker* and had left mine on the bench. I started to read it. There were five or so CP members within earshot of me and others were scattered around the room. The bell went for us to start work. Two or three minutes had passed when the CP supporter to whom I had lent the pamphlet turned round and speaking directly to Stan Hives, one of the leading CP members in the factory, said: 'So this is not a fake after all!' Silence. Then Peter Jackson, a YCL member known to Vince, came up to Hives and asked him if this meant that Khrushchev was a Trotskyist. Then the fellow traveller said out loud that Norman had been saying these things about Stalin for the past two years: 'I now accept that he is right. You [Hives] said that it was all anti-communist and anti-Soviet propaganda and all lies. What do you think now?'

With that, the foreman Bill Long got up from his desk and left the room. I overheard Les Dixon, a CP member, ask what the hell was going on. I suggested that we should have a debate in the canteen at dinnertime; the word soon got around. I was going to have to be very careful to separate myself from those who were simply anti-communist and would simply poke fun at the CP members. There would obviously be many seriously worried about events but who would still have loyalty to the Party. These could well be the best contacts to make. I wasn't sure that a discussion would actually take place, thinking that the Communist Party members would want to have a discussion among themselves first. After all, this was a huge question for them and it was only the previous evening that the story had hit the streets.

During the morning I had been thinking about how to approach the discussion and when the debate did happen, I had a few ideas prepared. The first thing to remember was that those who had joined the CP had done so to achieve communism. I gave my support to the 1917 revolution and made sure that it was understood that I opposed the Stalinist regime because it persecuted the countless thousands who had made the revolution possible and that Stalin, to defend his position of power, was prepared to sell out the international working class. At this point I reminded everyone of the way the CP had sold out our fight for a wage increase in our industry. The only defence Hives could put up was that I was an ultra-left and was trying to sound more communist than the Communist Party. They had very little to say in the party's defence. Frank Stockdale, CP member and deputy shop steward, said that we had very little time and that this was not a yes-or-no issue. I agreed and suggested that we should continue later and that they would have a better idea what to say after the Yorkshire Area meeting of the CP the following weekend. This had the desired effect: how come he knows before us? Stan Hives looked very uncomfortable so I added: 'Maybe he doesn't know about it yet.'

Writing this is like getting an instant playback. I even remember that I was so keyed up that I forgot to put my coat on and had to borrow a pen from Gilbert Taylor.

We never did have another discussion; it was a case of taking



At my bench in the cutting room at John Barran's

every possible chance that came our way to have discussions with anyone. We had acquired a list of CP members in the Leeds area and we toured all over knocking on doors, selling copies of the Twentieth Congress speech and hoping for a chance to talk. I worked in partnership with Jack Gale. We got a lot of discussion but we also got doors slammed in our face. We agreed that a slammed door did not always mean absolute hostility but might be simple party loyalty. In some cases this proved to be correct. On top of all that was happening in the CP, we had been able to gain massive support at the YCL conference for the abolition of conscription to the armed forces as opposed to cutting it to twelve months.

Over the next months we continued with the pressure by being regular visitors to wherever Communist Party members gathered, mainly the CP headquarters at Westminster Buildings and the Trades Council Club in Upper Fountain Street. We used the contacts we had to influence the discussions in the Communist Party branches. Then it filtered through from King Street, the CP national headquarters, that the recent developments had been as a result of the intellectuals having too much influence, making it possible to

keep the truth away from the membership. 'Mistakes have been made,' was the general cry, 'We will have a thorough examination of the facts and make sure that these mistakes don't ever appear again.' To reinforce this a debate appeared between Emile Burns and R Palme Dutt in the *World News and Views* about relations between the leadership and the membership. I was given a copy and was told the party was now getting to grips with the real problems that had been responsible for the contents of the Twentieth Congress speech.

CP branches were having regular meetings on this question. The members appeared more settled and some were more prepared to discuss. They felt more confident because they thought they had the answers to our questions. We were insisting that what had been revealed at the Twentieth Congress was only the beginning. The objective situation that was behind the speech would continue to create even more and bigger crises. As part of their re-vitalisation plan a Yorkshire rally was called in the lecture hall of the museum. As this was also a public meeting it was easy for us to get tickets. We felt very important as we were allocated our own personal stewards.

The YCL choir treated us to a few songs before the meeting got under way. The most important speaker of the night was to be Willie Gallagher, the veteran Scottish communist and working-class fighter. Years before I had read his books *Rise Like Lions* and *Revolt on the Clyde*. I was impressed. When he had finished speaking Jack Gale asked him what had happened to a comrade of his, Rose Cohen, who had vanished while living in the Soviet Union. Bert Ramelson intervened and said that type of question was not in keeping with the rally. I am sure that Willie was relieved at not having to comment on the question. I said that maybe it was just one of those mistakes that had been made. It is said that she had 'opened her mouth too much'. She had been a very close friend of Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the Communist Party at the time. In 1937 when Rose Cohen was being purged Pollitt intervened on her behalf very strongly, making him very unpopular. Rose Cohen was never seen again.

The situation in the Labour Party was changing. The Communist

Party cardholders and supporters in the Labour Party were moving closer to the right wing of the party, making their peace and becoming anti-communists. Some even became local councillors. A few became MPs. This was repeated all over Britain. This tendency grew following the Hungarian uprising. At the same time we were gaining more and more respect because of our principled opposition to the Communist Party and the Labour Party.

In October 1956, just eight months after exposing the crimes of Stalin, Khrushchev sent in the tanks against the Hungarian workers. The Communist Party was in a state of shock following this. The immediate response from the CP was that that MI5, the CIA and the fascists had stirred up the Hungarian workers to rise against the communist state. They were desperate for guidance from the leadership. Once again there were intense discussions taking place. The worker comrades in the CP were horrified. When strikes took place in Britain the media always worked on the lines that the strikers had been worked up by communist agitators. We all know that workers will not simply strike because they are told to. There have to be conditions prevailing to get the workers angry to respond to leadership. These criteria also applied to the workers' uprising in Hungary. News was filtering through not only from the media but also through working-class channels that workers' councils and a central committee were being set up in Budapest. The theory that it was a fascist-led uprising was blown out of the water. Reports came through of demands for ending the secret police, for workers' control in industry, the right to elect management in industry, and above all for the defence of the nationalised relations that existed in Hungary. These demands and many more were in the resolution passed at the central workers' council in Budapest. This was no right-wing coup!

The CP was devastated and it was hitting the worker members very hard indeed. They were not going to be bought off with the line that this was because of some mistake made by the intellectuals. This was tanks against the working class. To try and hold the situation the membership was asked to be patient as they were sending the *Daily Worker* journalist Peter Fryer to Budapest to get the real facts of the situation. Peter Fryer did go to Budapest, but

the *Daily Worker* refused to print the reports that he sent back about what he witnessed and what his enquiries uncovered. This was like throwing petrol on the flames. All over Britain members were refusing to do their *Daily Worker* deliveries; one was Frank Stockdale, a leading member in my factory. Albert Field, who had the biggest *Daily Worker* round in Yorkshire in the mining area of Castleford, also refused. Albert was a very dedicated communist and did not hesitate to take up the fight against the CP leadership. From experience I knew that he drove comrades all over Yorkshire and further afield. He collaborated very closely with Cliff Slaughter in going around Yorkshire talking to and organising Communist Party members against the CP leadership. Albert was very much a free spirit; he had a van and found work wherever he could.

One evening Albert drove a sales team around the Castleford area. Halfway through the sale he left us to go and buy some scrap metal. When he returned we had finished off the sale. He told us that on the way home he had another call to make. We could hear the scrap metal being unloaded and after about five minutes he got back into the cab and gave me a fist-full of pound notes. I said that was a bit of good work, buy and sell in the same evening. Yes, he said, especially since it was bought at the front gate of a factory and sold back to them at the back gate. He pushed his cap further up his head and grinned from ear to ear.

On his arrival back in England Peter Fryer was in great demand to speak at large meetings of the Communist Party. Leeds was no exception. The Leeds Trades Hall was booked and, as expected, it was packed. These meetings widened the rifts that were already in evidence in the CP.

In Leeds, with the work and contacts that we already been able to make in the CP and YCL, especially in the period following our stroke of luck with the overheard telephone conversation, the Group decided that we should take the discussion into the wider labour movement. I was to move a resolution in my trade union branch with the intention of sending it to Labour Party sections, but more importantly to the Leeds Trades Council. It was here that the Leeds trades union movement was represented at its monthly meetings. The Communist Party had a very large delegation from union

branches. The main points of my resolution were opposition to the tanks being brought in against the workers, and a list of the points made by the Budapest central strike committee.

The CP was very busy preparing for this meeting of the Trades Council. A meeting of Leeds members was called where tactics were discussed and a line thrashed out. No mock discussion between Burns and Dutt would satisfy the members this time. We were told of their line of attack by our contacts who were at the meeting. It was to be on two fronts: 1. Western intervention had been the cause of the growing opposition to the Soviet Union and the workers' unrest. Any arms that the workers had been able to acquire had been provided by Western imperialism, as opposed to arms being provided by dissident groups in the army. 2. All the opposition to the tanks being sent in was being encouraged by right-wing reactionary forces. Anti-communists were using the situation to attack the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had to be defended.

Ramelson told the delegates that the right wing and Catholic Action would support my resolution. All communists and supporters had to close ranks and defeat Harding's reactionary and anti-communist resolution.

When we were told of these decisions it confirmed the points that we had agreed should be made:

1. Defence of the Hungarian workers and their property relations;
2. Defence of the Soviet Union;
3. Defence of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917; and
4. Support for workers in struggle all over the world.

I thought that points three and four would help to push the right wing into supporting Ramelson. This was a situation where political principle was more important than simply winning the vote. I had met with Jack Gale, John Walls and John Archer to go over my speech and the points that I was to make.

I was very nervous as I went into the Trades Hall that Wednesday night. In all modesty I did feel that I was defending all those millions who had been slaughtered by the Stalinists and capitalists alike. Ramelson was the most capable man in the party and a very dominant figure. John Walls was already there at our usual table.

The hall slowly filled; it became obvious that this was going to be the biggest Trades Council meeting for a very long time. Before the meeting started Bert Ramelson came over to me and asked if for the sake of unity I would accept his amendment. It simply said that we were all worried about the events in Hungary and that an international delegation should be sent to try and resolve the situation. This I rejected out of hand. It made me more determined. I realised that he was a very worried man and I started to feel more relaxed.

The meeting started under the chair of Councillor Malwyn Jones so I knew that I would get a fair crack of the whip. When we had reached the appropriate place on the agenda he called on Brother Harding to move the resolution. John gave me words of encouragement. I had ten minutes to make my points. I moved the resolution and covered all my points. John seconded. The main attack, as expected, came from Ramelson. He was very agitated and concentrated on the point that the events were being orchestrated by world imperialism and that the Soviet Union had intervened to counter the danger of fascism. He pointed at me from the other side of the room and said: 'This is something you failed to mention.'

I was asked to reply to the discussion. I finished by addressing my closing remarks to all of the delegates: 'I don't want any fake tears for the Hungarian workers. A vote for the resolution is a vote for the international solidarity of all those workers who are in struggle. It is a vote defending the right of the workers in Russia to have their revolution in 1917, as it is the right of the Hungarian workers to fight against Stalinist domination.'

Tellers were elected, the vote taken and the resolution narrowly defeated. The vote was interesting. Sufficient CP members voted for the resolution to cause the CP concern. How many members voted against out of loyalty to the Party is hard to say. But the right wing voted for Ramelson, encouraged by the 'do you want fascism in Europe again' line, and of course because they were against the working class fighting for their rights. I knew that Ramelson would have been watching to see who voted for and who against. I shouted across the room: 'Who got the right-wing votes, then?'

The following days a winter of discontent descended on the

Communist Party and members were showing more and more displeasure in the leadership. The CP once again tried to lay the blame at the feet of the intellectuals. Hives spoke in a very hostile manner, saying: 'What do those intellectuals at the university understand about the problems of the working class?'

1957 was to be another very eventful year with many expulsions and resignations from the Communist Party.

In the first half of July 1957 the Labour Party organised a youth rally in Hyde Park (they never learn). They had arranged for quite a large contingent from Sweden to attend. Because Hyde Park is a royal park we were not allowed to sell or give away literature. This of course would suit the Labour Party as it meant that we could not sell *Keep Left*. As always it was left to the *Keep Left* Young Socialists to bring the contingents that would swell the rally. It upset the Labour Party when they found out that we had translated our statement that was in *Keep Left* into Swedish. A team was to give these out to the Swedish contingent. While doing this Jack Gale and I were arrested but released when we promised not to give any more out. The promise meant nothing as we had run out of leaflets anyway.

That evening a number of us volunteered to make some placards for a picket, at Vivienne Mendelson's flat. It was here that I was introduced to a young man by the name of Royston (Roy) Bull. He had recently made himself known to the Young Socialists in London. He appeared to be keen and said that he was coming to Leeds university at the start of the term and that he would like to stay in touch. I took many steps to make contact with him without any success. There was no sign of Roy Bull. Then one day in the factory Hives told the members that at last there was someone at the university whom the workers could trust and who would be speaking to the branch at the weekend. The name of this CP representative was Roy Bull, and he was a venom-spitting anti-Trotskyist. There was many a confrontation with him. On one occasion he was present on the barge that the students had on the river Aire. There was a very heated discussion and Cliff Slaughter, who had now joined us, offered to baptise him in

the river. He was strongly advised to leave. I was in no doubt that he was the most venomous anti-Trotskyist that I had ever met. I can't remember when he disappeared from the scene altogether.

Fifteen or so years later I was about to leave the Workers Revolutionary Party Centre in London when in came one of our journalists, Stephen Johns (Hammond), closely followed by Roy Bull. Party leader Gerry Healy took them into his office. I hung around and when they had left I went in to see Healy and told him what I knew of Bull and said that I did not trust him. Bull had told Healy that he been in the Communist Party, had gone to Moscow, become disillusioned and returned to England and taken a job with the paper the *Scotsman* in the London office. Then, through the journalists' union branch, he had met Johns, who in turn introduced him to our paper, the *Workers Press*. I am of the opinion that Bull vanished from the university and went to Moscow where he received some kind of special training – and came back and found his way into our paper. I did in fact tell Bull that I did not trust him. Not without cause, I might add. Healy later said that he understood why I did not trust Bull, but that I had to give him a chance.

Now back to 1957. The factory management had obviously noted that the Communist Party position in the factory had been weakened, so they decided to put a ban on the *Daily Worker* being brought into the factory. When this decision was relayed to the factory committee we immediately called for a meeting in the canteen. I approached Hives and said that I would move a resolution saying that the *Daily Worker* would continue to be brought into the factory as this was a democratic right. I suggested that this would be better than asking the management to withdraw the ban. They agreed. The resolution was passed. It was also agreed that we would not officially tell the management of the decision and simply continue bringing the *Daily Worker* into the factory. It did cause a bit of confusion in a few people's minds that I had defended the Communist Party in this way, after all that they were saying about me. I simply told them that it was a case of working-class solidarity.

Jack and I were out every night possible with our new large format *Labour Review*, taking every opportunity to visit anyone we thought would talk to us. On one occasion I was travelling home

to Cross Gates on the tram when one of the two men on the seat behind me said, 'It will be terrible if we have to admit that John Archer has been right all the time.' When they got off the tram I followed them. They went down Harehills Lane and turned into a street just past the Hillcrest cinema. I noted the street, went home and arranged for a canvass of the street with *Labour Review*. This issue had a yellow cover and in large black letters on the front cover were the words 'The Moscow Trials'. The two CP members were located. We did have a discussion but they said that they were going to stay loyal to the Party. When in the future we called to see them we never received a hostile reception. Later in the year we received an invitation to send someone to speak to the Harehills branch of the Communist Party. Barbara Slaughter, one of those who had recently left the CP, went. Discussion forums where dissident CP members and ex-members along with other groups in the labour movement could discuss the questions that had arisen over the last period had sprung up all over Britain.

The popularity of the forums led to a conference being organised at Wortley Hall near Sheffield on the weekend of 27-28 April 1957. Representing the Group were G Healy, Ellis Hillman, Jack Gale and me. There were others who were our comrades there but for the time being they were still in the CP. The session was opened by Professor Hyman Levy. This was a very important conference where many of those present took their first step to take different political positions. I will list those that spoke in the debate, taken from issue No.1 of the *Newsletter*, 10 May 1957, edited by Peter Fryer:

G Healy, Jack Gale, Mercia Emmerson, Jim Roach, Ken Coates, Raya Levin, Peter Worsley, Tom Kaiser, Adrian Gaster, John Daniels, Dick Goss, Alan Lamond, H Kendall, Bert Wynn, Jack Britze, Harold Silver, Eric Heffer, John Saville, Max Hamilton, Jerry Dawson, T Cowan, Harold Ruben, Jeff Barker, John St John, David Wood, John Fairhead, Martin Flannery, Pauline Harrison, Joe Young, Lawrence Daly, Peter Fryer, Roydon Harrison, Ralph Samuel, Edward Thompson, Raymond Challinor, Paddy MacMahon, Johnnie McLoughlin, Michael Segal.

I returned to Leeds knowing that I had heard and met many exceptional people.

THE NEWSLETTER

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a service to socialists

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COMMENTARY

As was made clear in the circular announcing its publication, *THE NEWSLETTER* has no sections and no policy. Its main purpose is to provide socialist militants and documents which they will not find adequately treated elsewhere. It is referred to in the first instance to what a speaker at the Wootley Hall conference of the Socialist Workers Movement called 'anti-Stalinist Marxists' that is to say, those who have left the Communist Party since the Twentieth Congress and the CPSU, the organisations who are remaining inside that party to fight; and the large number of socialist (and non-socialist) the Labour Party, also have many fundamental aims in common with those Marxists.

This first issue gives particular prominence to two things: the situation in the Communist Party since its recent Congress; and the Wootley Hall conference. It does so because the decisions that communists are taking in these first few post-congress weeks, and the developments of such campaigns as Wootley Hall, are shaping the future of the Marxist movement in Britain for years to come.

THE NEWSLETTER has no intention of becoming sponsored by the state within the Communist Party, nor deeper than ever, but the reaction to such a proposal would be almost certain to be intensely important. Here is the answer to the question about 'spineless intellectuals' who have 'lost their nerve'. Renton is a man of steady courage, ideal and devotion to principle. What have Gollan and Palfin to say to this man who has ceased to be a communist, but because he remains a communist? Renton has quit because the leadership evaded and will continue to evade all the questions of principle which the Congress ought to have faced. So long as those leaders continue with the old methods and policies those who are true to principle, true to their ideology, true to their records of service to the working-class movement, will remain out of the party. This is the lesson that Congress representatives attending all over the country are deriving home.



The question arises: what are the 40 members to do? It is not *THE NEWSLETTER*'s job to answer this question for them, but as well as reporting what they see in face doing, our columns are open to an exchange of views. Can a genuine communist movement be built in Britain? What part have the Feminae, those women of 'silly consciousness, to play? Should we join the Labour Party? The usual 'we can't say anything new'. These are the questions that readers and readers-to-be are discussing. Their letters will be welcome.

WHY I LEFT THE COMMUNIST PARTY

by Don Renton

I was described by Harry Pollitt in 1944 as 'a fine example to all of us in his devotion to the cause of Communism and his real enthusiasm as a militant fighter for the working class and a most capable and loyal member of our party'.

Six months before the Khrushchev revelations at the Twentieth Congress I found the name of the Institute of Collective Leadership in the CPSU at a meeting of the Scottish subsection.

I hoped that the CPSU would say for all we had wanted to go to be if Khrushchev's account of how the French was Yugoslavia would show was true.

I challenged the talk in Western Europe, declaring that Khrushchev's account of Soviet's internal affairs could explain the 'evolution' under which Communists were persecuted. Later Hink, Brown, Gollan and others were 'definitely'.

My discussion took place in the party. I came to the conclusion that our party leaders have what had been seen on both in the 1944 and Eastern Europe but deliberately concealed the facts from the membership.

At the recent party congress I gave a speech (which I had written about Gollan and Palfin) which brought me into the party.

In both this case and that of Dr. Edith Brown I am sure, that the party Centre knew what was happening—but they did not act.

They say that were shocked by Khrushchev's revelations, I believe them, they were shocked that Khrushchev had the courage to do this—but that the fact that he had left the party did not concern them.

I remain loyal to the principles which brought me into the party. I believe it right to continue with more democratic party principles.

Don Renton's career

He was expelled from the Labour Party when he was expelled and the Communist Party when he was expelled—20 years ago. He served in the British Battalion of the International Brigade and was wounded at Brunet, and spent months in Franco's prisons.

Expelled in 1936, his imprisonment, he was released by an exchange of prisoners.

When he got home he was only an socialist and a first class in any sense, with nothing better about it. Edith and other comrades who in the battle of the tanks, and who, it seems to the hands of the workers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In London in the late thirties Renton met with J. R. S. Williams, the then leading opposition figure within the Party, and worked together in a number of the late thirties. With them he had met in his own democracy.

(Continued on page two)

NEAR WEEK'S NEWSLETTER . . .

. . . will contain the first instalment of one important article.

Talks with Soviet leaders on the Jewish Question by J. R. S. Williams, these famous articles were to appear for the first time in any British publication, have been specially translated from the Russian for *THE NEWSLETTER*.

The Last Two Years in Poland by Stanislaw Korwinski, an important contemporary, revealed in a young Polish pamphlet, who has been in the thick of the struggle for

First issue of The Newsletter, May 1957

In the first edition of the *Newsletter* there is a letter from Don Renton explaining why he left the Communist Party. He had joined it in 1929, fought in Spain with the International Brigade, and spent some time in Franco's prisons before becoming full-time organiser in Edinburgh. He left because the CP no longer represented the principles for which he joined. There were hundreds of similar cases.

In retrospect there were sectarian attitudes within our group. Although I didn't recognise it, this revealed itself once when I was staying at Bert Karpin's house during a weekend northern aggregate.

I had been outlining our work in Leeds with the YCL and CP following the Twentieth Congress speech and Hungary. He was putting coal on the fire at the time. He put down the coalscuttle and said, 'I don't know why you bother. They're all Stalinists.' At the Sunday morning session of the aggregate I let it be known that I was opposed to this line of thought. Karpin in his defence just said that maybe it was possible to recruit one or two. He was not challenged in any way.

For my holidays I used to have one week at our annual camp and the second week helping in the printshop. Formerly a stable, it was down a cobbled alley off Venn Street, behind Clapham High Street. The entrance was through two big metal green doors and then another very solid door into a narrow white-washed passage.

In the first room on the left you would see Tony Banda working at his compositor's workbench. Coming out you would hear the jingling and clanking sound of the hot-metal Linotype machine. Under the stairs to the store room was what passed as an office — just enough room for a small table, with a light bulb hanging from the steps. On the table was a telephone and just enough room for someone to work. Anyone going in or out of the comp room had to squeeze past whoever was sitting there. The passage opened out into the printing area with a Heidelberg flatbed printing press. There was just enough room to walk round the press but down the side, directly opposite the passage, there was enough room for a bench where three or four comrades could sit and work, collating pages of a book and such like. At the far end was another door that led down a short open passage, with a door to the flat upstairs. In later years I 'lived' in one of the rooms. It was announced in one *Newsletter* that the following edition would be smaller because of a construction change in Plough Press: a door between the comp room and the printing area. A small thing, but it made things easier.

I spent many a long day and night happily working at the bench on whatever was being printed at the time and talking to my comrades. The high point of the night would be when we went out and had a sausage sandwich at the stall in Venn Street.

On the first weekend in August 1957 I was at this bench, from

where you could see directly down the passage. The doorbell rang, someone answered the door, and in walked a very smartly dressed man. I was introduced to Harry Constable. Gerry Healy, who was in the printshop at the time, said: 'Come in, Harry, we have been waiting for you.' A discussion took place around the need for action on the London docks in support of the strike taking place at Covent Garden Market at the time. Mike Banda was to take the car and go with Harry to visit other dockers' leaders. Healy said: 'Go with them, Norman, you'll find it an experience'. We met a number of leaders from the different docks.

The following morning, at 05.00 hours, I went with Ted Knight, Vivienne Mendelson and others to join the picket at Covent Garden. The others had been on the picket line before but this was my first morning. Later Ted and I went to the Transport and General Workers' Union office to see the Covent Garden branch secretary Bernie Holland and arrange for Harry to come and see him and the strike committee that morning. They were delighted at the thought of support from the London docks.

When Harry arrived we went to the union office. Bernie was already there, the table was cleared of newspapers and off-cuts from the printshop were laid out as notepaper on the table. Picket leaders and the strike committee were sent for and trays with mugs of tea were brought in. It was agreed that Ted and I could stay. Bernie outlined the history of the strike and agreed that it was now time to get support from other sections of workers. Harry concentrated on gathering as many facts about the strike as possible. He told the committee that he would be back in touch with them later in the day. The room emptied, the men went back to their posts, and the windows were opened to let out the haze of smoke.

By mid-afternoon I was in the strike office getting details for a leaflet that was to be duplicated that evening for the next morning's picket. The telephone rang. Bernie answered and said something like 'great news'. Then he told a steward to get round the pickets and tell them that Constable had got Tooley Street docks to refuse to handle fruit and veg in support of the market men. This was a great boost for the pickets and set off a chain of support around the docks. In the *Newsletter* of 17 August 1957 Hugh Scannell (West

India Docks) outlined the solidarity between the London dockers and the market men and any other sections of workers who found themselves in struggle for wages and conditions of work. That was why the dockers' and stevedores' union, NASD (known as the Blue Union), was supporting the market men. London, Liverpool, Birkenhead, Manchester, and Hull docks had already declared their support for solidarity action. At Canary Wharf (London) a fruit ship had been declared black so the owners had sent the ship to Oslo, but no docker would handle it there either. All the way up to Leith dockers would not handle produce destined for Covent Garden.

The officials of the Transport and General Workers' Union and their closest friends in the Communist Party were completely discredited in the eyes of the strikers. One such official tried to weaken the will of the strikers because of a writ that the Covent Garden owners were taking out against the dockers. Tommy Walker, leader on Butler's Wharf, let it be known that the only document they were interested in was a union card and the obligation it imposed on trade unionists.

The 4,000 market men fighting to keep conditions that had been squeezed out of the employers over years were being betrayed at every turn by their leaders. National Secretary Frank Cousins, darling of the Communist Party, was sunning himself on holiday. Because the strike was unofficial they did not get a penny from the union. The bosses had prepared well for the strike and had a well-drilled army of scabs, mainly their clerical staff, even though young members of the Clerical and Administrative Workers' Union were there early every morning to dissuade their members from crossing the picket line. One of them, Vivienne Mendelson, spoke at the rally of market men and dockers in Trafalgar Square. She received a tremendous welcome and was applauded, especially when she said Cousins should have been there.

When he did come back from his holiday, Cousins spent a long time closeted with Mack (the knife), the bosses' leader. A recommendation for a return to work was plotted. Since the dockers had decided to return to work only when the market men went back, these two knew the strike had to be ended quickly. The number

of dockers taking supportive action was increasing at a rate of 2,000 a day. Cousins addressed a meeting of the market men and persuaded them to accept the recommended offer by a small majority.

At a mass meeting of the strikers the press was banned but special dispensation was granted to the *Newsletter* so Ted and I were allowed to stay. Communist Party members protested and demanded that we should leave. The stewards defended us, saying we had earned the right to be there. Things looked as though they could turn nasty so we decided to leave. We did not want the meeting side-tracked. Harry arrived to speak as we were leaving. We explained the situation and he agreed with our decision. He had been up all night trying to put some backbone into Bernie Holland and the strike leadership. When the strikers understood the conditions of a return to work they voted by a large majority to continue the strike. I can only imagine what impression Harry made on them, dressed smartly, as always, in a suit. Cousins received applause, but Harry got a standing ovation.

However, when support was at its highest point the market men's union leaders finally convinced them to go back to work. Harry wrote a pamphlet, *Lessons of the Covent Garden Strike*, which I still have. It was also reproduced in the *Newsletter* of 24 August 1957.

Harry Constable earned the right to be referred to as a leader of leaders. He won great respect as a working-class fighter and played a part in every struggle on the London docks after 1945. In 1951 the Labour government charged him and six other dockers with conspiring to incite an illegal strike. London dockers Harry Constable, Albert Timothy, Edward Dickens, Joe Cowley and Liverpool dockers Robert Crosby, Joe Harrison and Bill Johnson were threatened with prison, but their release was met with widespread rejoicing. It had nationwide publicity and made an impression even in my clothing factory. Harry was respected as a working-class leader by many Communist Party members even though he was known to be a Trotskyist.

While writing this section I learned that Harry died in December 2000. He will always be remembered. Goodbye Comrade.