

# MARX, MARXISM AND THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS MOVEMENT: SOME CONTINUING ISSUES FOR THE 21st CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** For Marx the British working class was both a practical inspiration and a challenge. Britain's was the world's first majority proletariat and in the 1840s was also the first to create a mass working class party. Yet in the second half of the 19th century British trade unions changed direction, allied themselves with bourgeois political parties and worked within the assumptions of the existing system. Marx's explanation of this transformation is, the article argues, of continuing importance for our understanding of working class consciousness—with its key elements carried forward by both Luxemburg and Lenin in their critique of the revisionism of the Second International. The main intent of the article is to use more recent examples of working class mobilization in Britain to show the continuing relevance of this analysis. It focuses in particular on the issue of the relationship between the working class and a Marxist party. In doing so it draws on the Soviet school of Vygotsky and Leontiev to argue for a dialectical and materialist understanding of the development of working class consciousness in which the role of a Communist Party, in Marx's terms, remains critical.

**Key words:** Communist Party; Marx; Lenin; British working class; social consciousness; Vygotsky

We start with a paradox of British politics. In Britain the Communist Party has never won more than very limited electoral support and has at best secured only a couple of members of parliament. Yet as a party it has on occasion exercised very major influence within the working class movement. In the 1920s, 1940s and 1970s in particular, the resulting mobilizations compelled the ruling class of one

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of the world's great imperial powers to retreat, change tack and adopt radically new strategies of rule.

This article considers how this influence was exerted and origins of the style of work adopted. It argues that the source was two-fold. On the one hand, it stemmed from the party's adoption of a particular model of mass engagement in the 1920s derived from Lenin and his immensely influential Left Wing Communism. Later, however, this was supplemented by the party's own active learning—itsself a product of its immersion within the mass movement. In terms of learning, however, the article also notes that historically there was a reverse process. Lenin's understanding of the relationship between the party and the wider movement was powerfully influenced by the lessons which Marx and Engels drew from their own analysis of the British working class in the 19th century.

### **Marx and the Problem of a Non-revolutionary British Working Class**

Engels described Britain's National Charter Association of 1840 as the world's first authentically "working class party."<sup>2</sup> It based itself explicitly on the working class. It was organized on democratic centralist lines of debate followed by united action. It had a mass membership and branches in virtually every town and village. The two week general strike of 1842, the biggest anywhere before the 20th century, was called in its name in order to secure a democratic suffrage. And democracy in such conditions of mass mobilization by Britain's majority proletariat was, as Marx observed, tantamount to a direct challenge to capitalist state power.

Yet within ten years this united class movement had disintegrated. While individual trade unions survived, they catered principally for skilled workers, organized little more than 5 percent of the working population and mostly disavowed politics. Workers in general were drawn within the ideological orbit of the Liberal and Conservative parties and working class communities were increasingly divided by ethnic conflict directed against the 1 million immigrants who arrived from Ireland after the famine of 1846–47. So what had happened to the previously class conscious movement?

The explanation developed by Marx and Engels attributes this transformation to the emergence of a "labour aristocracy." In brief, this refers to the stratum of skilled workers granted trade union freedoms in the course of the 1840s and 50s who used these rights to secure a growing income differential against the rest. What made these concessions possible was Britain's monopoly of world trade—and, as Engels noted, when this monopoly was eroded in the 1890s, united working class politics began to re-emerge. But, while this trade monopoly lasted, it enabled Britain's rulers to grant privileges which ensured that the only section of the working class with any organizational strength did not use it on behalf of the working class as a

whole. This explanation powerfully influenced, though in somewhat different ways, the arguments of both Lenin and Luxemburg.

It is, however, important to look at what Marx and Engels actually said—particularly in light of the sustained attack made on the concept of the Labour Aristocracy over the past 40 years.<sup>3</sup> Its critics argue it is reductionist: it seeks to explain ideology by direct reference to economics. The critics take particular exception to the concept of “false consciousness”: the claim that the diverse ideas, beliefs and patterns of consumption that divided working people in the later 19th century (Engels’ “division of society into innumerable gradations”) were somehow false and a response to the weight of capitalist oppression and alienation. Instead, most claim that the real explanation for the proliferation of sectional identities can be found in the normal maturing of an industrial society and the victory of liberal ideologies which gave scope and place to working people within its political system. It was, the critics argue, the period before 1850 that was abnormal and transient—not the period afterwards—and that Marx’s expectations of revolutionary change were therefore misplaced. Very similar assumptions underlay the arguments of Eduard Bernstein at the end of 19th century in favor of parliamentary reformism.

Marx and Engels’ explanation did indeed highlight material and economic factors. But one key point needs to be made about it. The essence of the explanation was that it was *conjunctural*. It was understood dialectically, determined by particular historical circumstances. It referred to a specific challenge by the working class—and a specific response to it by the ruling class. Nor did it present economics as somehow crudely determining politics. In *Capital* Marx describes the years immediately after the 1842 general strike as “epoch making in the economic history of England.” In 1843, when the Chartist movement and the 10 hours agitation “had reached their highest point,” the “spokesmen and political leaders of the manufacturing class ordered a change of front and of speech towards the workpeople.”<sup>4</sup> The employers sought common cause and promised “not only the double-sized loaf but the enactment of the Ten Hours Bill.” Marx then goes on to describe how the manufacturing lobby sought to limit the earlier concessions once the Chartist movement had been broken and when the imprisonment of its leaders and dismembering of its organization had “shaken the confidence of the English working class in its own strength.”

Marx did therefore see the 1840s as a turning point. But it was not achieved by economic concessions in themselves. It was the way the “change of front and of speech” responded to the political demands of the working class movement and how the resulting concessions, real in their time, were ideologically embedded. Gains were made—but the wider challenge for power was at the same time beheaded and broken. In 1885 Engels quoted Marx thus: “The Revolution of 1848, not less than many of its predecessors, has had strange bedfellows and successors. The very

people who put it down have become, as Karl Marx used to say, its testamentary executors. Louis Napoleon in France had to create an independent and united Italy, Bismarck had to revolutionise Germany...—and the English manufacturers had to enact the People's Charter."<sup>5</sup>

A final point is also necessary here. Marx and Engels were active participants in the British working class movement for the half century after 1848. Few knew its leaders and organizations better. They ceaselessly analyzed its changing trends in order to establish what might be a politically and ideologically sound base for renewed class organization both nationally and internationally in terms of the First International.

Three conclusions stand out from their assessments. One was the conviction that this base would not be found among the privileged strata and particularly those leaders who sought to exercise influence within establishment political parties. It would be, as Engels put it in 1871, "amongst the masses of London." This was an issue, he said, he had "talked over many times with Marx."<sup>6</sup> The second was the conviction that the sectional stereotypes that divided working people had to be challenged. Marx constantly battled to secure commitment from the trade union movement against the British occupation of Ireland and more widely against British imperialism. Anti-Irish racism was, he argued, fundamentally disabling for Britain's working class movement. No less significant was the exercise of patriarchal authority within a workforce that remained, in majority, female and juvenile. Engels identified the labor aristocracy as being based where the "labour of grown up men predominates." In the 1880s Engels and Marx's daughter Elinor identified trade union organization among women as playing a key part in the recreating of a genuinely mass and class conscious movement: "the new unions based on the masses whose minds were free from 'respectable bourgeois prejudices'."<sup>7</sup> The third conclusion was that the passivity of the British working class was temporary and dependent on specific material conditions—which, as Engels noted, were already under challenge by the end of the 19th century.

## Lenin and the British Labor Movement

Lenin studied the British movement closely. In the 1890s he had translated the Webbs' *History of British Trade Unionism* into Russian and actively used this material in his polemics against the "Economists" in Russia and their attempt to put the building of a trade union movement before the development of a socialist political party. This, he argued, would lead, as in Britain, to the dominance of bourgeois politics. Most famously, he highlighted the term "labour aristocracy" to show that Marx and Engels also identified the danger that trade unions by

themselves, even though based on genuine struggle, would remain prisoners of bourgeois assumptions.

At the same time, Lenin also urged the prime necessity of direct, active engagement with the trade union movement. He cited Engels' condemnation of the sectarianism of Britain's Social Democratic Federation, who refused involvement in "non-socialist" trade unions, and his support for Elinor Marx's involvement in organizing women and general workers.<sup>8</sup> It was against this theoretical background that Lenin argued his famous theses: that revolutionary class politics had to be brought to the trade union movement from "without" by a socialist party that focused on state power, posed wider democratic tasks and elaborated the necessary alliances between the organized working class and other classes. We will come back to this.

In terms of Lenin's influence in Britain the key text came much later, in 1921. This was *Left Wing Communism* which directly addressed British Communists. In it Lenin, the fierce accuser of Britain's labor aristocrats, nonetheless argued for full involvement with every section of the trade union movement including official trade union structures and the Labour Party and argued against the opposing positions, then dominant in the party, put by Willie Gallacher and Sylvia Pankhurst. As Lenin acknowledged, these two representatives of British socialism were in no way naïve or inexperienced. They represented a generation that had transformed Britain's trade union movement. Over the previous two decades the numbers organized in unskilled general workers unions had overtaken the skilled unions and a mass shop stewards movement had been created. 1919 and 1920 had seen the establishment in Britain's industrial heartlands of workers committees and Councils of Action based on rank and file workplace organization, trades councils and street committees. It was this alternative of mass-based rank and file organization which Gallacher and Pankhurst proposed as the basis for wider challenges to state power.

It should also be stressed that this generation of socialists in Britain saw themselves as carrying forward, in an almost direct way, the political practice of Marx and Engels. Tom Mann, founder member of the Communist Party in 1920, had worked with Engels and Elinor Marx to create the first general union. In 1921 he was also to become the general secretary of a transformed engineers union. James Connolly, the great theorist of labor's role in national liberation, was only recently dead. Those who would form the new Communist Party were those who had fought and defeated the proponents of chauvinist imperialism in the British Socialist Party, the Independent Labour Party and the Socialist Labour Party. They knew at first hand the role of the "labour lieutenants" of capitalism within the trade union movement.

Lenin's counter-argument was that, although a vigorous rank and file movement existed in Britain, the revolutionary socialists themselves still only represented a small minority within the wider working class population. Chauvinist and

anti-socialist politicians remained in control of the Labour Party and much of the official trade union movement. And the British ruling class, represented by Lloyd George, the leader of the combined Liberal and Conservative government, knew the crucial importance of supporting a right-wing led Labour Party against the Left. Hence, argued Lenin, the importance of fighting for socialist politics inside the official structures and avoiding the potential isolation of the rank and file movement. Only if socialists won leadership within these official structures could the trade union movement as a whole be mobilized against the ruling class. Setting up separate “politically correct” unions, or focusing simply at the base, would isolate the Left.

Gallacher, though not Sylvia Pankhurst, was persuaded by Lenin’s arguments and these in turn were won inside the new Communist Party.<sup>9</sup> However, this victory was not achieved without very considerable difficulty. The vigor of the debate inside the new Communist Party is important. It demonstrates that the issues were those of lived experience. Party members were not simply endorsing abstract concepts but did so on the basis of their direct knowledge of how to work as socialists in a mass movement. Organizationally, the years 1922–23 saw the restructuring of the party into branches at workplaces and their adjacent communities, “at the points of struggle,” and the implementation of a united front strategy within the labor movement. The same period also saw the defeat of those who still adhered to sectarian positions inherited from Social Democratic Federation/BSP, prioritizing propaganda over work within mass class organizations.<sup>10</sup>

### **The British Working Class Movement and Lenin’s Political Line**

This victory was of determining significance within Britain’s working class movement for two reasons.

First, it laid the basis for a series of key interventions by the Communist Party which, as noted earlier, forced the ruling class onto the defensive and brought about decisive changes in strategy. Second, the adoption of Leninist perspectives of work was not passive. It involved active, collective learning. The party’s industrial cadres had to implement it in their own special conditions. They tested its effectiveness at first hand and it was the confidence derived from the resulting successes which sustained the British party in its protracted opposition to Comintern’s shift to sectarian Class against Class policies after 1928, its reluctance to establish separate “red unions” and its speedy endorsement of United Front and Popular Front policies after 1934–35. The confidence with which party members defended the strategy stemmed from their own experience. They had themselves organized the mass movements which had forced the ruling class to retreat.

Three instances can be briefly highlighted: the general strike of 1926, the adoption of welfare state policies between 1942 and 45, and the defeat of the Conservative government between 1971 and 1974.

**The 1926 general strike.** The strike arose from the British government's determination to defend the pound sterling as the prime currency for international banking and to do so by stabilizing its gold exchange value against the dollar. This required a major assault on wages. The government selected the miners as the first group of workers to attack. The Communist Party used United Front tactics to win a majority of unions within the British Trades Union Congress to back general strike action to defend the miners. This threat was successfully used on "Red Friday" to force the government to abandon its plans. The government then undertook far more detailed and ambitious anti-strike preparations, including the arrest of the Communist Party's entire political bureau, and in May 1926 locked out the miners. It then deliberately forced an unwilling TUC leadership to call a general strike in the belief that any strike would quickly collapse and that the resulting disarray and confusion would open the way for a comprehensive assault on wages across all industries.

However, the effectiveness of the Left's preparations on the ground meant that the strike did not collapse. Instead, it gathered momentum. Left-Wing dominated trades councils and Councils took control of a majority of industrial towns and cities. Fearful of the consequences for their own control, the right-wing leadership of the TUC capitulated to the government.<sup>11</sup> From the Cabinet papers we now know that the government itself was equally alarmed. Fearing further political radicalization, it backed away from any wholesale reduction of wages and five years later the pound was forced off the gold standard.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime the government and state agencies intervened to stabilize right-wing control within the Labour Party and trade union movement—though not sufficiently to stop the incoming Labour government disintegrating over the same issue of wage reductions in 1931.

The 1926 general strike was not therefore a victory. The resources at the disposal of what was then the world's strongest imperial power enabled it to win through. The miners were defeated. Temporarily trade union organization was weakened. But at the same time the ruling class had to change course in a way that involved a major reverse for its overall strategy. It demonstrated to party cadres that concerted, collective action within all the structures of the trade union and labor movement could mobilize action. More important still, the experience of the ten days of the general strike showed the potential for rapid changes in political consciousness.

**The events of the period 1942 to 1945** were quite different in character. This period saw the same ruling class that had engineered the general strike committing itself to a massive reversal of policy. After a decade in which it had sought to reimpose control through mass unemployment, it now backed full employment and

the universal provision of social welfare, housing, health services and education. The head of the main employers' organization, the Federation of British Industries, wrote in 1942: "unless the men in possession are prepared to adapt themselves and compromise, there is no alternative to a complete socialist revolution."<sup>13</sup>

It would be wrong to claim that this transformation was solely or even mainly the result of interventions by the Communist Party. The role of the Soviet Union in the war against fascism, the success of its planned economy and the resulting changes in the world balance of class forces was decisive. Yet the Communist Party also played a key role as intermediary. The party's work in the 1930s in building up an anti-fascist popular front had combined an intensification of its workplace organization with a series of wider interventions: among the unemployed, in cultural and intellectual fields, on the national question in Scotland and Wales, in the Labour Party and on the critical issue of democracy against international fascism.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1930s it had achieved an ideological dominance on the Left inside and outside the Labour Party. During the war, especially from 1941, this dominance intensified.<sup>15</sup> In 1943 the Ministry of Information estimated that the readership of the Communist *Daily Worker* was well over one in twenty in some parts of the country, still higher among young adults and was reaching up to a fifth of workers in some factories.<sup>16</sup> For each industry, nation and region the party put forward plans for post-war reconstruction—carried into workplaces through the Joint Production Committees and into policy for nationalization and economic planning through individual trade unions. Equally effective work was carried out by party cadres inside the army. The party's membership quadrupled within four years.

The result after 1945 was not socialism but a Keynesian managed economy—albeit with a large measure of nationalization. At the same time, these concessions further constrained the options of the British ruling class: full employment in particular strengthened the organization of the trade union movement through the post-war years. As Marx put it a century earlier, the introduction of a welfare state represented a major change of "front and of speech"—a change that was most unlikely to have come about had it not been for the Communist Party's strength of organization in workplaces and within the trade union and labor movement.<sup>17</sup>

**1970–74.** These years are probably the most remarkable in their testimony to the effectiveness of Communist workplace organization. The three decades of full employment and rising living standards after 1945 had witnessed an ebbing away of the wider political consciousness. Both Labour and Conservative politicians had been able to pose as the deliverers of managed welfare capitalism. The Cold War had politically isolated the Communist Party. Yet full employment also generated a stronger, more combative trade union movement which was increasingly shop steward and workplace led. At this level Communists held their ground.

It was the attempt of the incoming Conservative government in 1970 to control rank and file wage militancy that led to a major upsurge in class mobilization and eventually in class consciousness. The government's weapons were increased unemployment, statutory wage controls and legal restrictions on strike activity. The Industrial Relations Act, which became law in 1971, was designed to strengthen the hands of right-wing trade union leaderships over the shop stewards movement. Its implementation sparked three years of industrial conflict that ended with the government's electoral defeat. The Conservative Party election broadcasts appealed to voters to decide who should govern Britain: the elected government or the industrial organizer of the Communist Party. The election manifesto of the victorious Labour Party was the most Left-wing to date—promising an “irreversible shift of wealth and power in favour of working people.”<sup>18</sup>

The Communist Party's strategy of intervention had four main strands. The first was within the official movement: over previous decades it had worked in the key industrial unions, the miners, engineers and transport workers, to win Left policies and leaderships. The second strand of intervention was at the workplace: it created a rank and file organization, the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions, to unite the shop stewards movement nationally against legal attack. Thirdly, its militants responded to the government-orchestrated closure of workplaces by work-ins and occupations. In doing so they were able to generalize the struggle against unemployment under the demand for the “right to work.” Two hundred workplace occupations took place between 1971 and 1973. The fourth strand was politically the most potent. At regional and national level in Scotland and Wales, the Left leaderships of the emerging mass movements sought to set themselves at the head of regional alliances, including small and medium businesses, to defend the local economies.

In consequence, the Conservative government found itself caught in a trap of its own making. Its legal attempts to use right-wing trade union leaders against the rank and file discredited them still further and led to the TUC voting to defy the law. General strikes took place for the first time since the 1920s. Statutory income controls brought solidarity strike action between different groups of workers. The reductions in state aid to regional economies, in an attempt to use unemployment to discipline the workforce, enabled the workers to stand as champions of small and medium business and in Scotland at least do lasting damage to the political base of the Conservative Party. The resulting shift to the Left also seriously destabilized right-wing control within the Labour Party.

Once again the eventual political outcome did not amount to a cumulative advance for the Left. The incoming Labour government nationalized aerospace, shipbuilding and motors, prepared to take public control of oil and, after a further general strike threat, abolished all anti-trade union laws. But the Right-Wing within

the government was then able to use the threat of the financial markets and the IMF to throw the government's program into reverse. This brought an early election in 1979 that returned a Conservative government. Under Margaret Thatcher, this committed itself to ending the post-war welfare consensus and introducing far more draconian anti-working class policies—though at the economic cost of the colonization of the City of London by US banks and a far more parasitic relationship with the United States.

So, to sum up these brief historical snapshots. They should have illustrated two things. One is the continuing role of Britain's economic imperialism. The ruling class of one of the world's great imperial powers still possessed considerable room for maneuver—less than in Marx's day though still considerable. If it was no longer able to rule in the one way, it always had sufficient economic leeway to devise another. But the second clear lesson is that Communists were nonetheless able to exercise mass influence. They were able to mobilize, create alliances, develop class consciousness and change the balance of forces in the Labour Party despite the party's relatively small size and lack of electoral influence. In doing so it was able to draw not only on Lenin's understanding of how the party should relate to the organizations of the working class but also on its own active experience over half a century.

### **Class Mobilization: Marx, Lenin and Luxemburg**

It is useful to start this concluding section with John Kelly's 1998 monograph *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilisation, Collectivism and Long Waves*, currently recognized as the most authoritative text in the field of Britain's industrial relations.<sup>19</sup> Kelly provides a critique of the previously dominant descriptive narratives and calls for theoretical explanation. He attacks sociological approaches that seek to explain workers' responses in terms of individualized game theory rationality. He insists that the characteristic pattern of Britain's industrial relations, its periodic switches between passivity and activism, requires the analysis of processes of *collective* class mobilization. And he argues that the dynamics of such mobilization can only be understood in terms of people's changing perceptions of social inequality and class injustice—with the key issue being how and when such justice is perceived and when it is not. Within this process Kelly gives central place to the role of political activists and how they "framed" specific issues to expose wider questions of social injustice.

It is therefore, as would be expected from John Kelly, an approach which draws implicitly on the Marxist tradition and takes us back to the issues with which we started. This is the relationship between class and party, between passive "non-

political” trade unionism and interventions that enable trade unions to bring about wider political class-based mobilization.

It is our concluding argument that the approach of Marx and Engels, particularly as carried forward by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, has the potential to further deepen the analysis put forward by Kelly. If Kelly’s approach has a deficiency, it is its adoption of a somewhat positivist understanding of the circumstances in which the successful “framing” of issues of social injustice takes place. On this front it bases itself on the work of Charles Tilly and Doug McAdam which, despite its insights, is not Marxist and proceeds within the assumptions of positivist sociology—in particular using large-scale cross-cultural correlation.<sup>20</sup> It therefore fails to grasp the specific *conjunctural and dialectical* character of class mobilization. It is this, as we have argued earlier, that lies at the heart of Marx’s approach and which informs the particular role he and later Lenin assigned to a party.

Rosa Luxemburg brought this out very well in her 1906 text “The Mass Strike, the Party and Trade Unions.” Examining the events in Russia in 1905 she stressed “the element of spontaneity” in the eruption of political strike action. But she also stressed that such moments did not occur in a vacuum. They were, while unpredictable, materially determined: “‘Revolution’ and ‘mass strike’ are concepts which signify only an external form of the class struggle and which have a sense and a content only in connection with determined political situations.”<sup>21</sup> It was the role of socialists to analyze these determinations. Luxemburg also highlighted the problem of denouement which followed each revolutionary upsurge: the trend to bureaucratization which in 1905–06 enabled the new reformist government to absorb a now legalized trade union movement. In this she contrasted the mass strike with “the naturally limited horizon which is bound up with disconnected economic struggles in a peaceful period.”<sup>22</sup> It is therefore an analysis that is very similar to that of the British movement given by Marx in *Capital*.

Luxemburg’s stress on “sense and content” being “politically determined” leads us directly to the Soviet school of materialist social analysis led by Vygotsky and, more recently, by Leontiev.

Leontiev stresses that the way people understand and respond to calls to action is inherently social and specific. It is always constrained by the meanings attached to language that is materially embedded within an individual’s immediate circles of contact.

The individual does not simply “stand” before a certain “window” displaying meanings among which he has but to make a choice, these meanings—representations, concepts, ideas—do not passively wait for his choice but energetically dig themselves into his connections with people forming the circle of his real contacts. If the individual in given life circumstances is forced to make a choice, then that choice is not between meanings

but between colliding social positions that are expressed and recognised through these meanings.<sup>23</sup>

In turn, Vygotsky's follower Volosinov stressed that the moment of fundamental change are exceptional and triggered conjuncturally:

The ruling class strives to impart a supra-class, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish the struggle between social value judgements which occurs within it, to make it uni-accentual. This inner dialectic quality of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes. In the ordinary conditions of life, the contradiction embedded in every ideological sign cannot emerge fully because the ideological sign in an established, dominant ideology is always somewhat reactionary and tries as it were to stabilise the preceding factor in the dialectical flux of the social generation process.<sup>24</sup>

Volosinov brings together three things: first the ideological role of the ruling class; second the impact of its apparent permanence on the perceptions of the exploited; but also, third, that the "inner dialectic quality of the sign," both its stability and its potential for change, is dependent on particular historically determined rights and dispensations. In times of social and economic crisis the material content of these contradictions can be challenged. But this will only actually happen if there are those present within Leontiev's "immediate circle of contacts" who can both understand and represent these material expectations and demonstrate the feasibility of wider class alliances by which to defend them.

We looked earlier at the very rapid mobilization that took place in Britain between 1970 and 1974. One major episode within this mobilization has been examined using the methodology of Vygotsky and Volosinov: the 15 month occupation of the shipyards on the Clyde. This mass action transformed Scottish politics and had a major impact on developments across Britain. In separate studies Charles Woolfson and Charles Collins used the recordings of workplace meetings to analyze the process by which a very diverse and sectionalized workforce, spread across four shipyards, was united to take over the yards and to maintain control in face of all attempts by the government to dislodge them. Their analysis reveals the critical role played by the relatively small group of Communist workers and shop stewards: 50 out of 8,000 workers.<sup>25</sup>

What enabled the Communists to secure this mobilization derived from two of the key lessons learnt by the party over the previous two generations. First, Communist cadres had to be part of the workforce, embedded within it long-run and, though for most of the time ideologically isolated, respected for their role as champions of everyday rights. They had to be able to understand both the material basis of the "inner dialectic quality of the sign" and speak the language of the workplace.

Second, they had to be part of a wider political collective, informed by scientific socialism, which constantly analyzed strategically, drew lessons from defeats and sought to understand the balance of class forces at national and international level. What enabled the Communist stewards to win the often very difficult debates in the yards in 1971 was their resulting ability to spring open “the inner dialectic quality of the sign,” to expose its material contradictions. In this case it was by being able to do two things. One was to show that the attack on jobs and conditions arose from the ability of big business to draw on the class power of the State. The other was to demonstrate the practical opportunities for new, broader tactics of resistance beyond the workplace by building wider class alliances. And for this two other conditions were critical. One was prior work by Communists within the formal structures of the trade union movement in Scotland to ensure that there was solidarity from major unions and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. The second was the Communists’ strategic understanding of the potential for a wider regional anti-monopoly alliance based on the small and medium sized business that were themselves damaged by the government closure of the shipyards. In this way the Communist shop stewards were able to win debates and progressively move the workforce from a position which was sectionally and economically militant but politically quite reactionary to one in which, 15 months later, the workforce saw itself in class terms as the champion of a wider regional and national alliance directly challenging the monopoly dominance of the economy.

This returns us to the style of work adopted by British Communists in the early 1920s as argued for by Lenin. Drawing directly on Marx and Engels’ analysis of Britain, Lenin argued that the dominant ideologies within formal trade union structures would always be “non-political” and hence those of the existing order. This therefore required a party of a special type, one “of” and in the working class, which could challenge these ideas with strategic perspectives based on Marxism.

Lenin’s prescriptions for a Communist party have often been misconstrued, sometimes willfully, as arguing for “external” intervention in the working class movement in a way that is manipulative and in ultimate terms dictatorial.<sup>26</sup> Rosa Luxemburg herself to some extent took this position in her polemic with Lenin and instead stressed spontaneity with the development of working class consciousness.<sup>27</sup> But in 1901 Lenin was simply reproducing what Marx and Engels had said in relation to the British trade union movement and which Kautsky had only a little earlier used in polemic with Bernstein’s revisionist call for almost exclusive concentration on trade union work.<sup>28</sup> It should be remembered that Lenin himself also stressed spontaneity in his analysis of 1905 and after 1917. “Revolutions,” he wrote, were “festivals of the oppressed” and in such circumstances working people were capable of “performing miracles,” of liberating themselves from “egoism and sectionalism.”<sup>29</sup> At the same time, he stressed that such transformations demanded

that revolutionary parties “should advance their aims more comprehensively,” not through revolutionary phrase-mongering, but by identifying the next stages of advance and the appropriate alliances required to consolidate them.

These points are of no small significance for us in the 21st century.

In the major imperialist powers the position of Communist parties, and notably in Britain, is currently considerably weaker—particularly in terms of the long term presence of Communist cadres across all sectors of the workforce and their collective organizations. To some extent, in these circumstances, mainly propagandist and electoral forms of intervention have had, perforce, to be adopted. But there is, in the current crisis, every reason to re-learn, re-invigorate and apply the hard lessons learnt in the course of the 20th century about the way in which class mobilization occurs and the need, for it to develop, to win these detailed arguments at the base and pose the feasibility of new alliances.

There would also appear to be lessons from the experience of the countries which were previously socialist.

In the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, Communist parties had to combine two separate but critically inter-related roles. One was to constitute the working class as a ruling class, to govern. The other was that of being a Communist party in the full sense of being part of the working class, integrated within it, and therefore able to mobilize for continuing social transformation. Combining the two roles, in the inevitable circumstances of intense imperialist pressure, posed difficult and sometimes almost insurmountable challenges. Alienation, as Yuri Andropov pointed out in 1983, could and would occur under socialism if the Leninist norms of party and working class democracy were not constantly renewed and if the Communist Party did not maintain an active role within the working population.<sup>30</sup> The Soviet film *The Bonus*, directed by Sergei Mikaelian during this period, focused on the same phenomenon: the problematic ability of the Communist party to provide leadership among working people. The drama of the film derives from the clash of material interests within different strata in the workplace and, outside it, with the wider social (socialist) aims of production. This drama is played out within the politics of the Communist Party branch.

As Blade Nzimande pointed out in seminal articles published way back in 1992, similar issues would also seem to apply in transitional governments. While in the new South Africa Communists would have to work in governing alliances with non-socialist forces to stabilize new forms of democratic rule, it would be no less important to work at the base to maintain the revolutionary potential of the mass organizations of the working class for further advance. Such organizations should not be formalized and tamed as part of a new “civil society.”<sup>31</sup>

In all these areas the perspectives of Marx and Engels on the role of a Communist party remain of critical importance. The development of working class

consciousness under capitalism is a discontinuous and often reversible process. Intermediary, localized and sectional forms of consciousness will constantly re-emerge, and, as Leontiev argued, predetermine responses. Consequently an organization is needed which is both organically part of the working class and also able to operate collectively in ways that enable its members to speak to the key material contradictions and understand the inner dialectic quality of meanings. To quote Marx: Communists “fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of the movement.”<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

1. This article was originally presented at the seminar organized by the Marx Memorial Library and the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung in November 2011. Discussants included Professor Enfu Cheng of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, Professor Yuri Emelianov of the CPRF, Prakash Karat of the CP India Marxist and Dr Carlos Camps Garcia of Cuba.
2. Engels (1881) “A Working Man’s Party,” *Collected Works (CW)*, Vol. 24, pp. 404–407.
3. The debate is explored further in Foster, “The Aristocracy of Labour and Working Class Consciousness Revisited,” *Labour History Review* 75, 3 (December 2010).
4. Marx, “Capital,” I, *CW* 37, p. 286.
5. Engels, “1845 and 1885,” *Commonweal*, *CW* 26, p. 297.
6. Engels uses the term “aristocracy of the working classes” in 1871 (Engels to Jung, May 10, 1871, *CW* 44, p. 147). In 1882 he describes the English workers as taking exactly the same line on colonies as the middle class: “the workers cheerfully go snacks on England’s monopoly of the world market and colonies,” Engels to Kautsky, September 12, 1882, *CW* 46, p. 322.
7. 1892 Preface, *CW* 27, p. 269; Engels to Sorge, April 19, 1890, *CW* 48, pp. 485–487.
8. Lenin, “Preface to the Correspondence of Marx and Engels with Sorge and others” [1907], *CW* 11.
9. Mary Davis, *Sylvia Pankhurst: A Life in Radical Politics* (Pluto, 1999).
10. The debate and the organizational consequences for the CPGB are examined in James Klugmann’s *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Formation and Early Years, 1919–1924* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1968).
11. J. Skelly, *The General Strike, 1926* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1976).
12. This is examined further in Foster, “What Kind of Crisis? What Kind of Ruling Class,” in John McIlroy et al. (eds.), *Industrial Politics and the 1926 Mining Lockout* (University of Cardiff Press, 2004).
13. Samuel Courtauld writing in *The Economist*, April 4, 1942, cited by Angus Calder, *The People’s War* (Jonathan Cape, 1969), p. 294.
14. Noreen Branson, *The Communist Party of Great Britain 1927–1941* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1985).
15. Paul Addison, *The Road to ‘45* (Pimlico, 1994), pp. 190ff, details the steps taken by the government in 1942 to limit the political and ideological influence of the party.
16. National Archives RG 23/43 Survey of 5,639 readers in June–July 1943.
17. Peter Sloman, “Rethinking a Progressive Movement: The Liberal and Labour Parties in the 1945 General Election,” *Historical Research* 94, 226 (November 2011) demonstrates that the Labour Party’s landslide victory was as a result its advocacy of a planned economy and not support for Keynesian economics.

18. Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley, *Revolutionary Communist at Work: A Political Biography of Bert Ramelson* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2011) examines the life of the main architect of Communist strategy.
19. John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilisation, Collectivism and Long Waves* (Routledge, 1998).
20. D. McAdam, C. Tilly, and S. Tarrow, *The Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge, 2000).
21. D. Howard (ed.), *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg* (New York, 1971), p. 231.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 262.
23. A. N. Leontiev, *Activity, Consciousness and Personality* (New Jersey, 1978), p. 94.
24. V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and Language* (New York, 1973), p. 21.
25. Charles Collins, *Language, Ideology and Social Consciousness: Developing a Socio-historical Approach* (Ashgate, 1999); and Charles Woolfson, "How Workers on the Clyde Gained the Capacity for Class Struggle: The Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Work in 1971–1972," in A. Campbell et al. (eds.), *The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–1979* (Ashgate, 1999).
26. Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What is to be Done? In Context* (Leiden, 2006) demonstrates that Lenin was in part at least supporting contemporary arguments by Kautsky against Bernstein and that translations have in part misconstrued Lenin as arguing for a conspiratorial party for its own sake.
27. Rosa Luxemburg, "Organisational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," *Neue Zeit*, 1904.
28. Karl Kautsky, "Trade Unions and Socialism," *International Socialist Review* 1, 10 (April 1901) follows very directly the analysis by Marx and Engels of the British trade union movement, including their use of the term labor aristocracy, in his argument against Bernstein.
29. Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution* (1905) and *Theses on the Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress* (1920).
30. Y. V. Andropov, *The Teaching of Karl Marx and Some Questions of Building Socialism* (Moscow: Novosti, 1983). These issues are examined further in Foster, "Trade Unions under Socialism: Perestroika Revisited," *Communist Review* (Winter 2007).
31. Blade Nzimande and Mpume Sikhosana, "Civil Society and Democracy," *African Communist* 128 (1992).
32. Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," *CW* 6, p. 518.