

Introduction

The continuing importance of the history of the British far left

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While putting together our second edited volume dedicated to the history of the British far left, we have witnessed nearly two years of Jeremy Corbyn's stint as leader of the Labour Party (in fact, the final touches to this volume are being added on 9 June 2017, the day after Labour's electoral surge under Corbyn). This has, in turn, brought a renewed interest in the far left's history.

Corbyn's victory in July 2015 had been on the back of a wave of enthusiasm among different sections of the Labour Party membership – trade unionists, young people, those who flirted with the Greens and other minor parties, working-class members, and, of course, refugees from the British far left. Many on the far left had written off the Labour Party as unreformable in recent years, but Corbyn's entry into the leadership contest after the 2015 election made a number of the Party's leftist critics reassess their analysis of Labour. The election of Corbyn as Labour leader seemed to many to overturn the assumed position of the far left since the advent of New Labour in the 1990s. From Militant Labour (later the Socialist Party of England and Wales) to the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), it was presumed that the Labour Party was unsalvageable, a bourgeois party that had abandoned the working class. Entrism was left to the rump of Militant, while the other groups began a long line of alternative electoral vehicles to Labour – Socialist Alliance, Respect, No2EU, TUSC, Left List (for example). Admittedly, some groups, such as the Communist Party of Britain, still called for a Labour vote at general elections, but asked people to metaphorically hold their nose while doing so. But the initial period after Corbyn's victory seemed to suggest that there was political life left in Labour, awoken from its slumber by the thousands of veteran activists from the social movements of the 2000s that Corbyn had been involved in, primarily Stop the War, the Campaign for

Nuclear Disarmament, Unite Against Fascism and the Palestine Solidarity Campaign.

However, as 2016 proved, trying to reform the outlook and membership base of Labour (which has been the intention of many of those supporting Corbyn) while trying to maintain the emphasis on electoralism (which has been the focus of the Party since 1945 at least) brought the Party to near schism. Looking at the long history of the relationship between the British far left and the Labour Party, it seemed that the lessons of the 1960s (when the International Marxist Group (IMG) and International Socialists (IS) became entities in their own right) or the 1990s (when Militant Labour had its ‘open turn’) might have to be learnt all over again. Entrism has its limits and it is possibly far better for the far left to be social forces outside the Labour Party putting pressure from without than to be marginalised while attempting to apply pressure from within. Since the Labour Party refused to affiliate with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the 1920s, the far left has had to negotiate how much to work with (or within) Labour and how much to differentiate and present an alternative.

The Communist Party of Great Britain had sought affiliation with the Labour Party several times during the inter-war period, but after its last attempt failed in 1945–46, the CPGB devised another way to influence Labour and bring forward the future possibility of a Labour–Communist alliance. This influence would come through the structures of the trade union bureaucracy. Most other groups on the far left looked to seek influence in the trade unions at rank-and-file level, but wrote off the higher echelons of the trade unions as reformist and too conservative. Nevertheless, this strategy of working through the trade unions formed the basis for the CPGB’s post-war programme, *The British Road to Socialism*. As John Callaghan has noted, almost all the elements of the CPGB’s plan to gain influence inside the Labour Party through the trade unions came together in the period between 1973 and 1983 (between the defeat of the Heath government and Labour’s ‘radical’ 1983 manifesto),¹ but as we now know, there were little tangible gains from this strategy. The victory of the trade unions over Edward Heath only resulted in a crisis-ridden Labour government beholden to the International Monetary Fund and Labour were roundly defeated in the 1983 election by Margaret Thatcher after the Party’s leftwards shift caused a section of the right to break away to form the Social Democratic Party.

The loss of the 1983 election is routinely blamed on ‘entrists’ pushing the Labour Party to the left, resulting in a manifesto that alienated the political centre. Roy Hattersley is attributed as saying the Party’s ‘Trotskyists, one-subject campaigners, Marxists who had never read Marx, Maoists, pathological dissidents ... played a major part in keeping the Conservatives in power for almost twenty years.’² Although the actual reasons for Labour’s

disastrous showing at this election are far more complex, the shadow of 1983 has loomed large over the party since Corbyn's leadership victory.³ Since becoming Labour leader, many predicted that Corbyn would repeat the mistakes of Labour under Michael Foot – giving too much leeway to the far left and thus encouraging a split with the centre-right. The far left was portrayed by many commentators as a nebulous force set to derail Labour's ability to present a credible opposition to the Conservatives and one of the main reasons that Labour would lose any upcoming general election. While the spectre of various Trotskyists and communists inside the Labour Party had been raised, it also vastly overestimated the influence that the far left has within the Labour Party nowadays. In the end, when Theresa May called a snap election in April 2017, she expected to make significant gains for the Conservatives at the expense of Corbyn's Labour Party. As we write, Labour has defied expectations, campaigning on the back of an explicitly socialist manifesto, and gained the highest Labour vote since 1997, resulting in a hung parliament.

It all looked so different not a few short months ago. In his 2016 book on the Corbyn 'revolution', Richard Seymour suggested that the Labour Party 'may simply be untenable in its current form'.⁴ The gap between the electoral desires of the Parliamentary Labour Party and the grassroots call for reforms by a large section of the membership, not to mention the shifting voting base of Labour, seemed unsurmountable – and a resolution to suit all involved unrealistic. Journalist and economist Paul Mason then suggested that the Labour Party should become a social movement rather than simply an electoral political party. However, the post-war history of the British far left highlights the difficulties in creating a social movement around an organised political party rather than a single issue organisation. As Phil Burton-Cartledge showed in our last volume, *Against the Grain*, the success of the far left has come when it has spearheaded a broad-based social movement,⁵ such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Anti-Nazi League or the Stop the War movement, rather than when it has tried to consolidate and centralise its membership into a particular party. The history of the far left in Britain has shown that when different parties have attempted to transform momentum from a broad social movement into concrete party membership, this has not been easily translated. An understanding of the history of how the far left has operated and functioned in Britain since the 1950s is therefore important to understand the limits of a radical agenda within a reformist framework. It is hoped that this book, as well as the previous volume, will help provide readers with this understanding.

Our previous volume, *Against the Grain*, was published in 2014 and looked to start a conversation among scholars and activists about the history of

the British far left. Apart from the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), many of the other far-left groups had had their history ignored and their role in wider British politics, particularly in the various social movements of the last forty years, overlooked. *Against the Grain* attempted to overcome this and invited a number of established and emerging scholars to write about various aspects of the far left's history. This volume included chapters on the IS/SWP and Militant/SP, dissidence in the CPGB, Trotskyism and the Labour Party, Third Worldism, anti-racism and anti-fascism, women's liberation, gay rights, anarchism and the emergence of the British New Left.

We acknowledged at the time that the book could not be a comprehensive history of the British far left and would serve as a starting point for further investigation. Reviews of the first volume, while favourable, have pointed to several areas that we had not included and deserved attention, including the trade union movement, entrism and Militant, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Ireland, and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. With this in mind, we have been looking to put together this second volume ever since the first volume was published in October 2014.

In this time, the scholarship has widened, with a number of new books and studies published since 2014 (and with several of these authored by contributors to this volume). This has included research on race and the women's liberation movement, racism and the English working class, the Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners group, punk, youth culture and the far left, the British peace movement and communism, the far left and the 2010 election, the decline of the Communist Party, and the politics of Red Action (among others). Much of this scholarship is by a generation of emerging academics, bringing new historical insights and techniques to the study of the far left traditionally dominated by labour history scholars and those from political science. As this volume shows, the study of the history of the far left in Britain brings together scholars from a variety of disciplines, using a number of historical practices and theories.

As well as a widening scholarship, the study of the British far left has also been lifted by the new sources that have been made available to researchers, particularly those that have been put online. The US-based Marxist Internet Archive (MIA) has greatly expanded the texts available, with transcriptions or scans of many Marxist publications from across the world, but primarily the US and the UK. The MIA's two sub-sites, the Encyclopaedia of Trotskyism Online and the Encyclopaedia of Anti-Revisionism Online, have provided scans of the Socialist Labour League, the Workers Revolutionary Party, the Spartacist League and the various Maoist parties in Britain, while providing the texts of the entire first run of *International Socialism* journal. To rival the vast material available on the Marxist Internet Archive, a group of ex-IMG

members at the blog *Red Mole Rising* have dedicated themselves to scanning the publications, as well as the internal papers, of the IMG and its successor, Socialist Action. This includes an entire run of *Black Dwarf*, *Red Weekly* and *Socialist Challenge*. The Amiel and Melburn Trust, connected to the remnants of the CPGB, has published scans of *Marxism Today* from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, alongside the entire run of the first two New Left journals, *The New Reasoner* and *The Universities and Left Review*. The successor to the moniker of the CPGB, the former group that published *The Leninist* in the 1980s, has now put the entire back catalogue of this factional journal online. Another fringe organisation (that was featured in our previous volume) was Red Action, whose entire journal run (also titled *Red Action*) has been uploaded by former members. Furthermore, the Irish Left Archive, run by people from the Cedar Lounge Revolution blog, has collected material from a broad range of British and Irish left groups relating to Ireland and the conflict in Northern Ireland. The continuing digitisation of these materials by former activists possibly represents a democratising of the historical memory of these groups and the movements and struggles they were part of, allowing people across the globe access to materials that may have only been available to those with the means to visit the necessary archives if traditionally housed.

Several of the chapters in this collection are indebted to the materials that have been digitised and uploaded by these online archives. We believe that much more than the first collection, this volume covers a wide variety of the far-left groups, the movements that they were involved in and the issues that they engaged with. First is Jodi Burkett's chapter on the far left and the student movement in England during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Burkett points out, the student movement in England was not as homogenous as scholars, the far left and the press have traditionally believed and although intertwined with the far left, had different goals and strategies. Some groups, such as the IMG and IS, saw great potential in the student movement, but there was also scepticism, from the CPGB, Militant and sections of the IS that students were not necessarily part of the working class and had ambiguous class politics. However a problem that faced the left from the 1960s onwards was declining political interest from the working class, especially the institutions of the Labour Party and the trade unions, and that those attracted to the left increasingly came from the student movement and other sections of society.

Often critiqued as 'substitutionism' or 'vanguardism', a number of left-wing theorists believed that the working class in the advanced capitalist West could not be the revolutionary force that Marxists had previously thought and looked to these other groups and social forces. One of the endgames of this

kind of thinking was the belief that political violence against the state was needed, particularly as the capitalist system used violence against the left in the West, and against the Third World in general, such as in Vietnam. This led to the establishment of the Weather Underground in the United States, the Red Army Faction in West Germany, the Red Brigades in Italy and the Japanese Red Army in Japan. The second chapter also looks at a similar organisation in Britain, the Angry Brigade, who undertook a number of attacks on British installations between 1969 and 1972. J. D. Taylor situates the Angry Brigade within the wider anarchist/libertarian left movement that existed in London during this period, and the crossovers that the Brigade also had with a number of protest movements of the time, including the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Irish Republican movement, the anti-Franco movement and the campaign against the Industrial Relations Act. Taylor suggests that historians of the far left in Britain have often overlooked the Angry Brigade and despite their short-lived existence, their presence fed into a wider radical movement that was emerging after 1968 in the UK, as well as increasing repression by the state against the forces of the left.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Chapter 3 looks at the revival of the pacifist Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1980s. Although originally a political movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Jacquelyn Arnold shows that CND was revived by the re-heating of the Cold War in the early 1980s under Ronald Reagan and the controversial introduction of the Trident system by the incoming Thatcher government. In a similar scenario with the present, CND's resurrection coincided with a left-wing surge in the Labour Party under a pacifist leader, Michael Foot. The symbiosis between CND, the far left and the Labour Party saw the regeneration of the peace movement in Britain and radicalised a new generation of activists in the early 1980s. However, after the Labour Party took up the position of unilateral disarmament as a manifesto promise in the lead up to the 1983 election, the subsequent electoral defeat halted the effectiveness of CND and highlighted the limits for the left in working within the Labour Party.

Another social movement that gained momentum in the 1980s was the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). Started by exiled South African communists and members of the CPGB in the late 1950s, the AAM gained traction in the early 1960s with the Rivonia Trial, but was overlooked by many activists over the next decade. In Chapter 4 Gavin Brown shows that after the Soweto Uprising in 1976 and the death of Steven Biko in 1977, the British far left became increasingly involved in campaigns against apartheid South Africa, but greatly differed on strategies, analysis of the situation in Southern Africa and expressions of solidarity. By the 1980s, most groups supported the African National Congress, the release of all political prisoners

and some form of sanctions against the state, but beyond this, the groups varied widely in their approach.

The next few chapters shift focus from wider social movements to the way in which the far left interacted with the trade unions and the organised labour movement. First, in Chapter 4, Jack Saunders looks at how the International Socialists built a network of rank-and-file trade unionists inside the motor industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s and how this challenged the dominance of the Communist Party as the left-wing alternative to the Labour Party in the unions. Saunders shows how the motor industry became a breeding ground for 'Factory Trotskyism', with the Socialist Labour League and Militant also making headway at several plants, and concentrates on the limited impact that the IS had within the Chrysler factory in Stoke Aldemoor, Coventry.

The following chapter by Sheryl Bernadette Buckley explores the role that the CPGB played within the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s. The NUM was one of the most significant trade unions in the post-war period and also one of the most politically influential, as evidenced by the wave of strikes between 1972 and 1974 that brought down the Heath government. Buckley suggests that while the CPGB was heavily integrated into the structures of the NUM, at the times when it was most militant (during the early 1970s and in the mid-1980s), the Party was unable to influence the direction of the union, which could be seen as a microcosm of the broader problems of the Communist Party's industrial programme.

Also looking at the miners' strike that took place in 1984–85, in Chapter 7 Diarmaid Kelliher examines how other sections of the left and different social movements supported the striking miners. In particular, Kelliher unpicks the networks of solidarity created between various activist groups in London and the striking miners in Yorkshire and Wales. These networks, forged by anarchists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and black women, demonstrated the diversity of those who sought to confront the Thatcher government and potential allies for future activism, bridging the gap between the new social movements and the traditional labour movement.

While Kelliher looks at networks of solidarity built in the 1980s between striking miners in Yorkshire and activists in London, Daisy Payling's chapter focuses on how the city of Sheffield, particularly through the Sheffield City Council, became a site of resistance against Thatcherism in the 1980s. This was partly due to the proximity of the striking miners in South Yorkshire to the city, where local and national campaigns of support converged, but Payling reveals that other 'local socialist' initiatives around housing and public services were developed in the city.

Payling shows that regional identity was important to those in Sheffield in combating Thatcherism, describing themselves as the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire'. The next chapters extend this, looking at the far left and regional politics across the different countries of the United Kingdom. In Chapter 9 Ewan Gibbs and Rory Scothorne explore how a 'left-wing' Scottish nationalism developed between the 1950s and the 1980s, and how the Marxist left and strong militant trade unionism helped Scotland shift from a Tory to a Labour heartland. Gibbs and Scothorne argue that even though Labour's electoral performance has recently declined, the 'myth' of a progressive Scottish nationalism has been long fostered north of the border.

As Daryl Leeworthy demonstrates in Chapter 10, a similar left-nationalism emerged in Wales in the post-war period, but also shows that this left-nationalism was not monolithic and fractured along several fault-lines. In particular, it was divided between the Labour Party and a relatively strong Communist Party, but also divided between Welsh and English speakers, and between North Wales and South Wales. For Leeworthy, Labour was slow to engage with Welsh nationalism and when it finally did, Labour's influence in the region was tempered by other factors, such as the defeat of the miners' strike and the rise of Plaid Cymru as a 'progressive' alternative.

Daniel Finn shifts our focus in Chapter 11 to the relationship between the British far left and the conflict in Northern Ireland. Beginning with the Connolly Association and its links to the CPGB, Finn outlines how the left tried to engage with the burgeoning civil rights movement in Northern Ireland in the mid-to-late 1960s, but when the conflict broke out in 1969–70, the various groups of the British left were deeply divided on how to relate to the violence of the Republican movement. Finn shows that some Trotskyist groups, such as the IMG, critically supported the Provisional IRA while other groups avoided the issue. This allowed People's Democracy and then Sinn Féin to present themselves, at different times, as local left-wing alternatives, although the dominant force in Republican politics has remained the nationalist wing of Sinn Féin.

The final chapters of this volume investigate three far-left organisations that were not featured in the first volume. Chapter 12 by Michael Fitzpatrick is an activist's account of the history of the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP), one of the most controversial outfits of the British left. Emerging in the mid-to-late 1970s from a Third Worldist splinter group from the IS, the RCP attempted to disassociate itself from the rest of the left and in the 1980s took several highly contentious positions on issues such as free speech, AIDS, Ireland and environmentalism (defended in a highly sectarian manner). The RCP is probably more well known for its shift towards libertarianism in the 1990s and its dissolution in 1996, with most of the Party's leading

figures establishing Spiked Online in the 2000s. We include this chapter as few people, either scholars or activists, have written about this group, despite the infamy of Spiked Online among most left-wing and progressive people. Fitzpatrick's chapter ends with the dissolution of the RCP in the late 1990s and does not venture into its successors, *Living Marxism* and *Spiked*, but the chapter helps us to understand the political trajectory that the RCP was taking that led to these initiatives. Like Mark Hayes' chapter on Red Action in the previous volume, we believe that these insider accounts need to be recorded and hope that it will encourage other scholars and activists to conduct research into these groups on the fringes of the political spectrum.

Next and with much relevance to contemporary events in the Labour Party under Corbyn, Christopher Massey charts the rise of the Militant Tendency as an entrism force within the Labour Party, from its days as the tiny Revolutionary Socialist League to the heights of its influence in the mid-1980s and then to the 'open turn' with the establishment of Militant Labour (later the Socialist Party of England and Wales). The history of Militant inside the Labour Party and their expulsion by the Kinnock leadership is important to ongoing debates on how the far left should interact with Labour and the limits of entrism (as well as the opportunities it presents).

This can be contrasted with the formation of the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), which broke away from the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1988 and retained control of the newspaper, the *Morning Star*. In this volume's final chapter, Lawrence Parker demonstrates that those involved in the creation of the CPB strongly believed in an independent Communist Party, but committed to the Labour–Communist alliance as described in *The British Road to Socialism*. The focus of the CPB was to maintain the traditional links to the trade union movement and a broadly pro-Soviet outlook, which they believed had been abandoned by the CPGB leadership in the 1980s. However, in a post-Cold War world, the CPB now competed with the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party to attract those who would have been originally drawn to the CPGB and this proved difficult for the Communist Party, with the *Morning Star* arguably 'saving' the CPB from oblivion.

As with *Against the Grain*, the aim of this volume is to showcase some of the emerging research on the topic of the British far left and how it fits into wider historical scholarship in and of Britain. Alongside recent debates about British political and labour history,⁶ we hope this volume demonstrates that we cannot ignore the far left; and while some might disregard such groups, parties and tendencies as obscure or on the fringes of the discipline, we argue that their histories reveal wider insights into the functions of the Labour Party, the role that social movements have played in recent history,

and the potential impact of far-left ideas beyond the small groups parodied repeatedly in mediocre *Monty Python*-esque routines over the last thirty-five years.

Notes

- 1 J. Callaghan, 'The Plan to Capture the British Labour Party and its Paradoxical Results, 1947–91', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40/4 (2005), p. 707.
- 2 Cited in, M. Steel, *Reasons to be Cheerful: From Punk to New Labour* (London: Scribner, 2001), p. 116.
- 3 For example, see: P. Dorey and A. Denham, '“The Longest Suicide Vote in History”: The Labour Party Leadership Election of 2015', *British Politics* (2016), doi:10.1057/s41293-016-0001-0.
- 4 R. Seymour, *Corbyn: The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics* (London: Verso, 2016), p. 12.
- 5 P. Burton-Cartledge, 'Marching Separately, Seldom Together: The Political History of Two Principal Trends in British Trotskyism, 1945–2009', in E. Smith and M. Worley (eds), *Against the Grain: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), pp. 80–97.
- 6 See: S. Fielding, 'Looking for the “New Political History”', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42/3 (2007), pp. 515–24; P. Readman, 'The State of Twentieth-Century British Political History', *Journal of Policy History*, 21/3 (2009), pp. 219–38; J. McIlroy, 'Waving or Drowning? British Labor History in Troubled Waters', *Labor History*, 53/1 (2012), pp. 91–119.