

A Brief History of the APCF

WHEN THE Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation (APCF) was formed in 1921 it was hardly the most auspicious moment to launch a new revolutionary organisation. The defeat of the Italian factory occupation movement in September 1920, the introduction of the New Economic Policy in Russia, and the failure of the 1921 March Action in Germany, were all regarded at the time as signs that the post-war revolutionary wave had begun to ebb. In Britain, unemployment leapt from 1.5 per cent in the autumn of 1920 to 18 per cent by the end of 1921, providing ideal conditions for an 'employers' offensive': militant shopfloor activists were sacked, and there was a general attack on wages, hours, and working conditions. The miners, in 1921, and the engineers, in 1922, both fought three-months-long struggles to resist attacks on their living standards, but both of these previously most-combative sections of the working class were defeated. At the same time, the state arrested and imprisoned over 100 revolutionaries of one persuasion or another (including Sylvia Pankhurst, Guy Aldred and John Maclean) on various charges of sedition.

Despite this, the APCF was not a stillborn organisation. Formed at the end of one World War, it enjoyed a vigorous if turbulent existence until the end of the next and deserves to be regarded as just as important a part of our communist heritage as many better-known parties or individuals. Some of the theoretical influences which helped to shape the APCF's ideas, and the activities and politics of the group during the period of the civil war in Spain and the Second World War, are discussed in detail in the Introductions which precede each of the four sections of this pamphlet. In this part we will concentrate on giving a brief outline of the APCF's history in the period prior to that covered by the rest of the pamphlet.

The main strength of the APCF was always on Clydeside, where it united two previously distinct revolutionary currents: the Glasgow Anarchist Group, which had emerged following the break-up of the Socialist League in the mid-eighteen nineties, and the Glasgow Communist Group, which had been formed at the beginning of 1913 after Guy Aldred's first visit to the city on a speaking tour. These two groups joined forces under the Anarchist label at the end of 1916. In May 1920 they renamed themselves the Glasgow Communist Group to express their affinity with the Bolshevik revolution and their desire for unity between communists in Britain. The Glasgow Communist Group in turn became the Central Group of the APCF when it was formed the following year.

From 1923 to 1929 the APCF published the monthly journal, *Commune*, supplemented on occasions (such as the 1926 General Strike) by a *Special Anti-Parliamentary Communist Gazette*. These journals expressed opposition to parliamentary social democracy (that is, in Britain, the Labour Party) and reformist trade unionism, and stressed the need for self-organised working-class activity, direct action, and the formation of workers councils or soviets at moments of revolutionary crisis. In 1927 the APCF made renewed contact with the remnants of the Left or Council communists in Germany and

Holland, but the British group, as well as being federalist in its outlook, was never keen to precipitate events by developing these links in any serious, organised form.

In the early nineteen thirties there was a split in the APCF when Guy Aldred and his followers broke away. Aldred had been strongly impressed by the 'Free Speech' struggle on Glasgow Green in the early 'thirties, when the APCF, Independent Labour Party, Scottish Workers' Republican Party and others had joined in a successful fight for the right to hold open-air public meetings on the Green without permits from the authorities. From the Free Speech Committee there emerged the Glasgow Workers' Council of Action, which sought to unite, for revolutionary action, the entire working class through the medium of its various organisations (trade unions, political parties, unemployed groups etc.). Aldred promoted the 'Council of Action' idea in his paper, the *Council* (1931-1933). Other APCF members, such as William McGurn of the Paisley groups were sceptical about it, arguing that in the absence of a revolutionary situation the Council of Action would either end up as a purely propagandist group or else be sucked into agitation for partial reformist demands.

Aldred, however, fired with enthusiasm for 'socialist unity' (which in his mind was made even more urgent by the rise of fascism on the continent of Europe), continued to advocate the Council of Action. In his *Socialist May Special* (1934) he announced a departure from the anti-parliamentarian position: not all anti-parliamentarians were socialists (since the fascists were also opposed to parliamentary democracy) and not all socialists were anti-parliamentarians (the ranks of the parliamentary social democrats might well contain genuine socialists). After a short spell in the Independent Labour Party Aldred and his supporters formed the United Socialist Movement in 1934 which, publishing the *Word* from 1938 onwards, survived into the nineteen sixties.

Although Guy Aldred claimed, somewhat egotistically, that the APCF had 'ceased to be a virile organisation' after he had left it, this is not true. For example, in 1935 the group published two pamphlets: *The Bourgeois Role of Bolshevism* (originally written by the Group of International Communists in Holland), and two texts by Rosa Luxemburg which the APCF titled *Leninism or Marxism*. Both of these were reprinted from the council communist journal *International Council Correspondence*, which was edited in Chicago by Paul Mattick. This marked the start of several years intermittent debate between the APCF and the United States group, some of the fruits of which are included in the final section of this pamphlet, on 'Party and Class'. In 1938 the APCF began publication of the paper *Solidarity*, which continued to appear throughout the war. With one exception, all the texts in this collection are taken from *Solidarity*, and thus date from the years after Aldred had left the APCF. As readers will be able to judge for themselves, the immense contribution which these texts made to the communist movement in Britain is a further refutation of Aldred's claim concerning the APCF's lack of 'virility'.