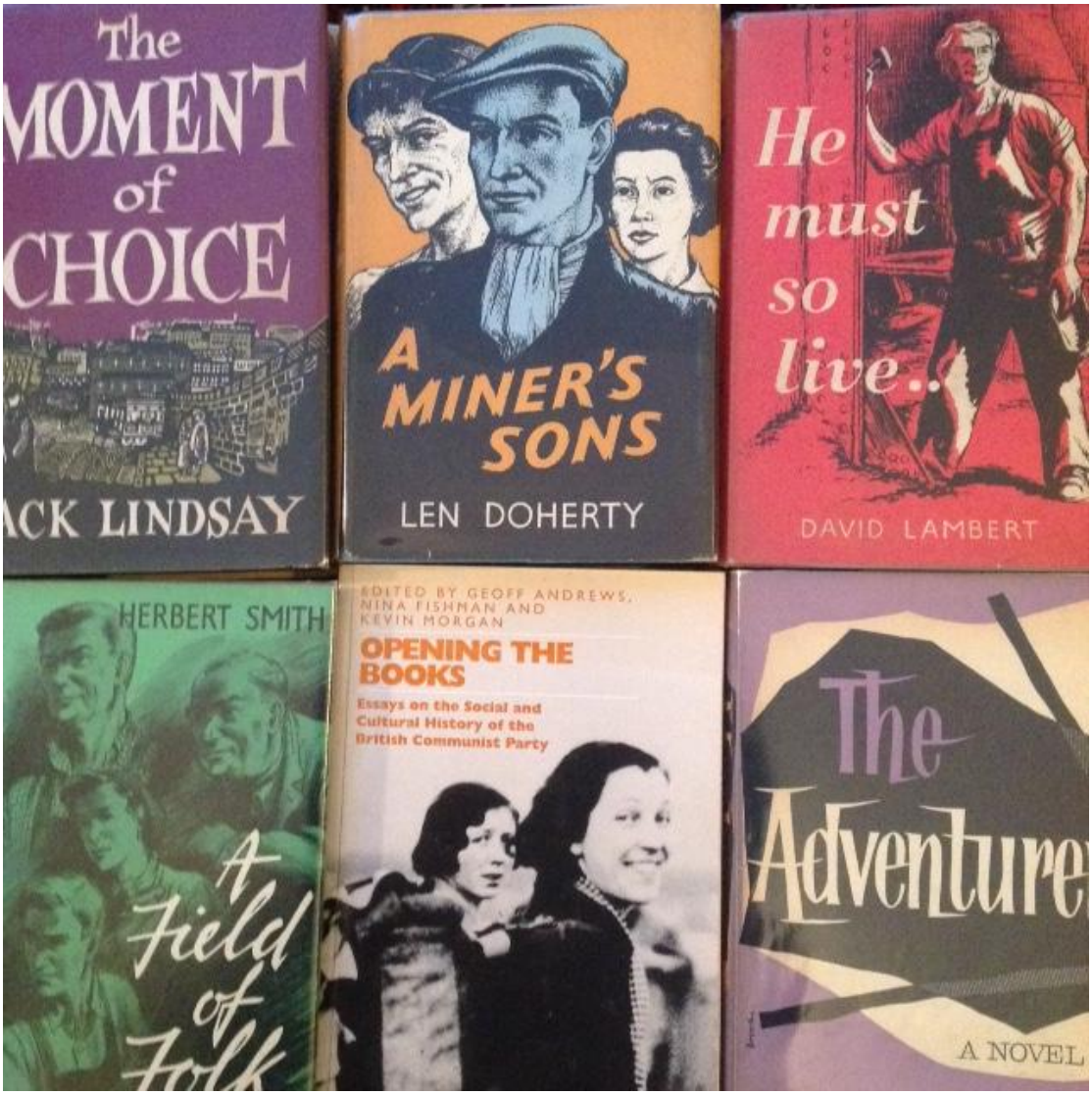
FOR THE GOOD OLD CAUSE :

trade unionism, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the post-war novel 1950-1965



Introduction

It is frequently noted by historians of the period that the image and role of the trade union movement changed dramatically in the early years of World War Two. The historian Henry Pelling refers to this as the period of 'power with responsibility'[1], a phrase that reflects the way in which the Trades Union Congress in particular saw its role as a partner in the war effort and in subsequent economic and social recovery. Dominated by essentially right of centre union leaders like Ernest Bevin of the Transport and General Workers Union, the TUC not only worked closely with the Government during the war but also pushed for extended post-war pay restraint[2] in the years of social and economic recovery that followed. However, this new age of trade union 'responsibility' was not welcomed by everyone and the tensions it created within the TUC family eventually saw those unions dominated by the Communist Party (the Electrical Trades Union, the Foundry Workers' and the Fire Brigades' Union) incrementally withdraw their consensual support for the policies being pursued by the Labour government between 1946 and 1951.

Writing in 1951 H.A. Clegg argued that being in partnership with management and pursuing joint goals axiomtically alters the nature of unionism:

> Despite agreements, grievances arise and the function of the union is then violently changed. From being a champion of the workers, it must change to acting as a policeman for the joint

[1] Henry Pelling *A History of British Tarde Unionism* (London, Macmillan, 1963) p214
[2] Ibid p.230

> agreement with the employer. This function is admittedly necessary…but it is not so popular, nor so satisfactory a role, as that of champion of the oppressed.[3]

This was an astute observation because it neatly captured the changing mood within the Communist-led opposition as they themselves entered a new phase of ideological and organisational development. In many ways the Communist party of Great Britian (CPGB) was facing a dilemma – it had failed to make a significant breakthrough in terms of membership and the electoral success of the Labour Party threatened to usurp or over-shadow its appeal to those drawn to radical or left of centre political alternatives. As a response it tried to develop a policy based on having the best of both worlds – retaining an independent voice that was critical of Labour whilst at the same time advocating a programme of entryism and infiltration across the trade union movement.

It is therefore no co-incidence that depictions of trade unions and trade unionism in British novels written following the end of World War Two are dominated by authors who were members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Between 1950 and 1965 over a dozen novels written by members of the CPGB were published that put trade union activity at their centre and all of them were specifically conceived of as contributions which would further the Party's political aims and objectives. To have so many novels of this kind appear over such a relatively short time span makes this period unique from the perspective of trade union related fiction and illustrates the way in which a growing labour movement and trade union membership, combined with a rapid development of the Communist Party in the UK, created a potential readership that would, in theory at least, be interested in the way in which the nature and role of trade unionism could be explored through the art of the novel. Indeed, the use of creative writing (as

[3] H.A. Clegg *Trade Unions as an Opposition Which Can Never Become Government* in W.E.J. McCarthy *Trade Unions* (London, Penguin, 1985 second edition) pp-87-88

part of a wider strategy for art and culture) was seen by the Communist Party as a 'weapon in the struggle'[4] and reflected an important strand of strategic thinking about the advancement of the Party's objectives in the years immediately prior to and following the Second World War.

This chapter explores a number of novels published during these years and sets them in the context of the development of the CPGB during that time. It will explore the Party's changing priorities towards writers and writing from its pre-war peak, through the recasting of its electoral strategy in the early 1950s and into the crisis of membership it suffered following the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. In parallel, the chapter will also consider the impact of CPGB on the trade union movement and the role it played in helping to shape the public image of the unions at what has been called that movement's 'high-water mark'.[5]

In addition the chapter will argue that the CPGB was an organisation that was fundamentally at war with itself over the role expected of the writer and artist in a revolutionary political environment. For authors writing within a Marxist tradition and from inside the CPGB, the issue of the control over form and content exercised by Moscow became an intrusive and contentious issue:

> ….the theory and practice of literature in the Soviet Union had been increasingly regulated by the policy of the Prolekult, the Bolshevik Party Central Committee, and the All Russian Association of Proletarian Writers(RAPP) – all of which endorsed the view that writers must serve the interests of the Party.[6]

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[4] Andy Croft(ed.) *A Weapon in the Struggle : the Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998) p1

[5] John McIlroy et al *The High Tide of British Trade Unionism* (Monmouth: Merlin Press,2007)

[6] Vincent Leitch *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, 2nd edn* (London: W.W. Norton, 2010) p906

This increasingly authoritarian and interventionist position by Moscow reflected the desire of Stalin to take a stranglehold on the levers of power and influence across Communist Party structures internationally as well as within the Soviet Union. The insistence that the prime function of the writer should be to serve the interests of the Party does, of course, raise the question about how that should be done and it is this that provides the key fault-line between those authors who decided to follow the lead given by Moscow and those who opposed a prescriptive and didactic approach. 'At issue was the theory of socialist realism'[7] which had been developed by Maxim Gorky and Stalin and promulgated by Zhdanov at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers.

The definition of socialist realism provided by Zhdanov was not universally accepted by all Party members, with writers and literary theorists, such as Georg Lukács, dissenting from the hard-line position favoured by Moscow. Lukács articulated an alternative definition of socialist realism in the novel which would allow the author to 'depict man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or other of their aspects'[8]. It will be argued in this chapter that the novels produced by members of the CPGB during the period between 1950 and 1964 are split across this fault-line both in structure and purpose with a body of work that reflects the Zhdanov approach to the production of socialist realism and an alternative, no less politically committed, set of novels that more closely reflect the position articulated by Lukács.

In addition to the discussion about form, the novels under examination in this section reflect the increased interest that was being expressed in a number of political and sociological arenas at the time about the nature and development of trade unions and trade unionism. In particular an increasing amount of attention was being paid to the growing bureaucratisation of trade union hierarchies and their frequently controversial role as a partner agency

[7] Ibid p.906
[8] Georg Lukacs *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1972) p.6

in government. Many trade unionists and political philosophers[9] had become concerned that while trade unions represented excellent environments in which ordinary workers could develop their political consciousness, there was a danger that committed individuals who find themselves working full-time for the union in a paid or lay official post would become detached from the very world that had been the source of that education. Inadvertently, or sometimes by design, trade union activists would find themselves using trade union structures as a means of 'escape' from their working class backgrounds or collaborating with management to quell legitimate worker disquiet over employment practice and issues of social justice. Michels[10] seminal study of political organisation had led him to postulate his 'iron laws of oligarchy' which suggested the urge to bureaucratisation was an inevitable consequence of the search for effective management. Hyman[11] notes that Lenin, Trotsky and C.Wright Mills all wrote within what he calls 'the pessimistic tradition' of trade union commentary which is typified by claims that some kind of incorporation into the interests of the capitalist class is an inevitable feature of union organisation. There are strong links in this discussion to the phenomenon of the 'affluent worker' and the issues of social mobility or embourgeoisment which would become the subject of study by Goldthorpe et al[12] in the second half of the 1960s. The novels written in the differing traditions of socialist realism discussed in this chapter address themselves directly to the inherent conflicts and contradictions that accompany the rise of the trade union movement to a position of influence within the capitalist system and the concomitant strains this imposes on individuals who see themselves as having their loyalty tested or who are seeking to use trade unionism as a stepping stone for their personal social mobility.

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[9] The work of Richard Hyman, especially *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism. (London: Pluto Press, 1971)* provides a valuable historical background to this debate. Sheila Cohen *Ramparts of Resistance (London: Pluto Press, 2007)* demonstrates that it is still an active debate within the trade union movement.

[10] Robert Michels *Political Parties* (New York : The Free Press, 1968)

[11] Richard Hyman *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London: Pluto Press, 1971)

[12] John H. Goldthorpe et al *The affluent worker in the class structure* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969)

The CPGB: a cultural and political insurgency

In 1995 Andy Croft claimed:

> No political organisation in Britain ever attracted so many distinguished artists, generated so much cultural energy, so many plays, novels, poems, paintings, songs and films as the Communist Party did. It may have been tiny, but its impact on British literary culture, like so much else, has been profound.[13]

Much of the focus of popular interest in the CPGB's activities and organisation has centred on the Party's membership in the period between 1930 and 1939, referred to by Willie Thompson as 'the days of faith', [14]when its numbers rose dramatically from 1,356 to a little over 15,500 (eventually peaking in 1942 at 47,932[15]). One reason why the Party grew so rapidly was because of its ability to appeal to so many in the creative arts who came from affluent and middle-class backgrounds but who had grown disillusioned with the politics of the establishment. John Rodden[16] argues that literary intellectuals like Auden, MacNeice, Spender and Day-Lewis were drawn to the CPGB because they were "overlaid with a romantic veneer suffused with fellow-feeling, a self-dramatizing Marxism of the heart."[17] It is undeniably the case that the CPGB's ability to offer a radical alternative to the perceived appeasement of the Fascist regimes emerging in Europe acted as a considerable draw for a range of intellectual opinion seeking to articulate opposition to authoritarian and increasingly nationalistic governments. Their

[13] Andy Croft *Authors take sides: writers and the Communist Party 1920-56* in Geoff Andrews et al *Opening the books: essays on the social and cultural history of the British Communist Party* (London, Pluto, 1995) p83
[14] Willie Thompson *The Good Old Cause : British Communism 1920-1991* (London: Pluto Press, 1992) p42
[15] John Callaghan *Cold War, Crisis and Conflict: The CPGB 1951-68* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003) p18
[16] John Rodden, 'On the Political Sociology of Intellectuals: George Orwell and the London Left Intelligentsia in the 1930s' *Canadian Journal of Sociology Vol.15, No.3* (1990) pp251-273
[17] Ibid p257

ability to organise and mount practical resistance to the rise of fascism across Europe – such as the part they played in recruiting members to the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War - made them, for a time at least, an attractive home for activists wanting involvement in a kind of practical politics which went beyond the debating chambers. However, as Croft also points out in his study of British fiction of the 1930s,[18]the popular interpretation of this period casts middle class flirtation with the radical Left ultimately as 'deluded idealism, revealed at last by events to be hollow and unrealistic'.[19]Adrian Caesar further underscores this impression when he claims that for writers such as Cecil Day-Lewis, W.H.Auden and Christopher Isherwood, membership of the CP represented 'a superficial wish to identify with the working class, because of an intellectual rebellion against the bourgeoisie.'[20] We can, perhaps, see evidence for this in Auden's own dismissal as 'dishonest' [21] poems such as 'Spain' and 'A Communist to Others' written in 1937 at the peak of his fascination with the CP cause.

However, there is a danger that explaining away the involvement of the intellectual middle-class as a superficial and temporary fascination or whim significantly over-simplifies the nature of the Party's influence and significance. Although the CP in the UK was not formally established until 1920, Laybourne and Murphy[22] have shown that its appeal to intellectuals and political activists was already well established by that time. John Lucas[23] argues that the defining moment for the Party was the General Strike of 1926 and the social consequences of the trade union defeat that followed. Lucas claims that 'the failure of the General Strike was of crucial importance to the

[18] Andy Croft *Red Letter Days : British fiction in the 1930s* (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1990) p
[19] Ibid p15
[20] Adrian Caesar *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class, and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: MUP 1991) p.75
[21] Quoted by Ian Samsom in 2007 at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3663242/I-saw-this-face-and-I-fell-in-love.html
[22] Keith Laybourne and Dylan Murphy *Under the Red Flag: The History of Communism in Britain* (London: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1999)
[23] John Lucas *The Radical Twenties* (Nottingham, Five Leaves Publications, 1997)

development of radical thought'[24] because it forced people to take sides as if it were 'a kind of civil war'[25]. Lucas argues that the defeat and humiliation suffered by the trade union movement – and by extension the whole working class – was seen by many middle class intellectuals as a betrayal of democracy and justice. And, echoing the earlier point made by Rodden, it is this that lies at the heart of what he calls 'a deep sense of shame [that] worked its way into their consciousness.'[26]

If it is indeed the case that the ranks of the CPGB were for a period swollen by a section of the intellectual middle-classes stricken with social guilt, it is also undoubtedly the case that at a critical moment in the inter-war years the CPGB appeared to offer writers and other creative artists a space where they could freely express themselves and challenge the views of the political establishment. It was also true, however, that tensions were not very far below the surface. Those members of the Communist Party membership who were concerned with the development of its cultural policy were not of one mind about the role of the writer in the struggle. Considerable debate within the Soviet Union and in Party branches internationally was already taking place at this time about how to interpret the status and role of the creative arts within Marxist thought and within Stalinism in particular. What role should the arts play in furthering Marxism and the revolutionary determinism at the heart of Marxist theory? In seeking to answer this question, the Soviet literary establishment looked backwards to its intellectual heritage. Ann Demaitre provides a valuable insight into some of the thinking that resulted in the calling of the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934[27] when she says:

[24] Ibid p217
[25] Ibid p250
[26] Ibid p217
[27] Gorky et al *Soviet writers' congress 1934 – the debate on social realism and modernism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1977)

> In looking for a well-defined doctrine that would provide the basis for Soviet aesthetics, the Bolshevists turned to Lenin, particularly to one of his articles entitled *Party organisation and party literature.* [28]

Lenin's view, expressed in 1905, that 'Literature must become Party'[29] and that the role of the the writer as a paid 'superman' should end and the 'literary cause become part of the general proletarian cause'[30] was adopted by the Congress as its starting point. Stalin's cultural policy director, Andrei Zdhanov, expanded further on Lenin's view that Party literature should stand as 'a counterpoise to bourgeois morals'[31] when he said:

> The present state of bourgeois literature is such that it is no longer able to create great works of art. The decadence and disintegration of bourgeois literature, resulting from the collapse and decay of the capitalist system, represent a characteristic trait, a characteristic peculiarity of the state of bourgeois culture and bourgeois literature at the present time.[32]

In that same speech Zdhanov asserts that the true role of literature is to describe and celebrate, through the medium of socialist realism, the primacy of the revolution and to illuminate the heroism of the proletarian spirit:

> In our country the main heroes of works of literature are the active builders of a new life – working men and women, men and women collective farmers[.....]Our literature is impregnated with enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds[....]It is optimistic in essence because it

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[28] Ann Demaitre 'The Great Debate on Socialist Realism' *The Modern Language Journal* Vol.50, No.5 (May, 1966) pp 263-268

[29] V.I. Lenin Party Organisation and Party Literature http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1905/nov/13.htm

[30] Ibid

[31] Gorky et al. Op. Cit. p

[32] Ibid p19

> is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat[.....]it is serving a new cause – the cause of socialist construction.[33]

Demaitre suggests[34] that there is evidence to support the view that Lenin meant his remarks to apply to *political* literature and not to literature in general but whether that is true or not his comments had clearly become the benchmark against which literary worth would be measured under Stalinism. Stetsky, manager of the culture and Leninist propaganda section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), stated unequivocally, 'Our guiding line is that of Socialist Realism',[35] and Stalin himself described writers as 'engineers of human souls',[36] whose job is to ensure that the lessons of the Soviet revolution are learned in a way most amenable to the regime in Moscow. Although this debate took place in 1934, it wasn't until immediately after the second world war in 1946 that the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party moved to formalise the policy on socialist realism. As Demaitre notes, 'from then on art and literature were regarded solely as instruments of Communist propaganda.'[37]

However, as indicated earlier, the idea of socialist realism that was constructed by Stalin, Gorky and Zhdanov was not the only one that had been developed or that had influence. Georg Lukács, also writing from within the Marxist tradition, rejected this narrow interpretation of socialist realism. His admiration for realist novelists from the bourgeois middle-class – Balzac, Zola, Scott – led him to take the view that political or ideological imperatives alone were not sufficient for the creation of great literature because fiction written

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[33] Ibid p20
[34] Ann Demaitre Op.Cit. p266
[35] Gorky et al Op.Cit. p263
[36] A.A. Zhdanov *Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zdhanov.htm*

[37] Ann Demaitre Op. Cit p266

to the Zhdanov model failed to acknowledge that historical and social context were important and changeable. Gordon Graham[38] summarises it thus:

> Human beings, he [Lukács] contends, are essentially socio-historical beings. Thus to describe the human condition in an illuminating way, the writer must tell stories and create characters that reflect the socio-historical determinants of real life. Those determinants are not, however, static; they form a process or sequence…The truth is that the unfolding of history can be understood not merely as a concatenation of the contingent, but a purposeful and directional whole.

Lukács, as Zhdanov had done, rejected modernist art and fiction as 'essentially bankrupt'[39] and was concerned that experimentation with form had grown at the expense of an appropriate focus on content. Instead, Lukács argues, writers should commit to critical realism as a necessary stage in the development of true socialist realism. Critical realism acknowledges its position in time and space and allows the author to engage in critical reflection:

> The critical realist, following tradition, analyses the contradictions in the disintegrating old order and the emerging new order. [40]

However despite being superior to modernism, critical realism was, according to Lukács, an incomplete position and should only be a necessary point on the way towards a fully realised socialist realism which would not only contextualise, analyse and understand action within the current historical and social context but see its significance in the context of a future which takes into account the necessity of socialism. In this sense, Lukács' notion of socialist realism is essentially dialectical.

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[38] Gordon Graham Lukács and Realism After Marx *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol.38, No.2, (April 1998) p198

[39] Ibid p199

[40] Georg Lukács *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963) p114

Lukács also put emphasis on what he saw as the essential dichotomy of the fictional character – requiring that it should be both typical and particular. He rejected what he thought of as the stereotypical 'types' presented in Soviet socialist realism and argued that:

> writers (too) capture this dialectic between the individual and the social, between what makes him / her a unique personality and those forces which determine his existence without regard for the individual. To be typical, in Lukács's sense of this term, characters must therefore embody in their individual fictional existence the larger 'world-historical' forces peculiar to the place and time which they are supposed to inhabit, that is, their place in the class-struggle and, by extension, within the social totality and in the dialectical progression of history.[41]

It is important to note however that the battle of ideas about the nature of socialist realism that was taking place within the Communist Party, and which would continue until the middle of the 1960s, was happening against a backdrop of the Party's wider political strategy aimed at building a mass movement of the working class. In order to more fully contextualise the reasons why trade unionism became such a prominent feature of the novels that were written in this period by CPGB members, it is helpful to briefly take stock of the role the CPGB played in the development of the trade union movement during the period immediately before and after the Second World War.

The rising tide of union membership

The impact that the failure of the 1926 General Strike on the direction that British trade unionism would follow cannot be overstated. Throughout the

[41] Richard L. W. Clarke *Georg Lukacs "Art and the Objective Truth " undated.* Accessed on http://www.rlwclarke.net/courses/LITS3303/2008-2009/04ALukacsArtandObjectiveTruth.pdf

years following the Strike, widely interpreted inside and outside the Labour Movement as a debacle, the unions were seen as weak and divided and entirely at the mercy of a political and economic environment that at first cowed and then co-opted them into the very fabric of government.[42] The emergence of trade union leaders more interested in co-option than confrontation gradually allowed the Labour Movement to be seen as ripe for rehabilitation. Pelling argues that the outbreak of the Second World War was a critical moment and something of a turning point for the union movement:

> The years from 1940 to 1951 saw the trade union movement undertaking responsibilities greater than ever before – for the first half of the period in wartime Coalition led by Winston Churchill, and thereafter in the post-war Labour Government of Clement Attlee.[43]

The decision to co-operate with and even participate in government was not greeted with universal approval. Lane claims that between 1926 and 1972 the trade union movement, with the Labour Party as their chief ally, were engaged in an unequal and often vituperative battle with the Communist Party:

> In the inter-war years it was a case of the Communists trying to push the inert weight of the labour movement in a revolutionary direction. In the post-war years it was a case of the Communists trying to make the labour movement more radical in its reformism.[44]

However, this is not to say that the CP were completely unsuccessful in this battle. The work of Nina Fishman[45]and John McIlroy[46]has demonstrated that

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[42] See Tony Lane *The Union Makes Us Strong: The British Working Class, its Politics and Trade Unionism* (London: Arrow, 1974) pp134-168 for a wider discussion of this period

[43] Henry Pelling *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London: Macmillan, 1963) p.214

[44] Tony Lane Op. Cit. p140

[45] Nina Fishman *No home but the trade union movement : Communist activists and 'reformist' leaders 1926 – 56* in Geoff Andrews et al *Opening the books : essays on the social and cultural history of the British Communist Party* (London, Pluto Books, 1995)

despite its relatively small membership, the impact of the CPGB on trade unionism in the UK between 1926 and 1956 has constantly been under-estimated. This may be because traditional trade union histories have focussed on both the leadership of the Trades Union Congress and the larger affiliated unions – all of which were in the hands of vociferously anti-communist proselytisers such as Walter Citrine, Ernest Bevin, Arthur Deakin and Victor Feather. It may also be the case that Labour historians looking for the story of the Left's influence within the trade union movement tend to deal with the impact of the CPGB only when the focus falls on the big set-piece conflicts such as strikes and lockouts; which is particularly true in relation to the General Strike in 1926, the London bus strike of 1937 and the dock strike of 1949 where the role of the CP seems to emerge as if from nowhere.

Fishman notes that:

> Historians of all kinds have remained stubbornly incurious about what Communists did in the troughs and lulls...Yet Communists were continually active throughout the period. They routinely performed copious amounts of bureaucratic labour inside union lay institutions and in workplace collective bargaining committees during the long stretches of calm.[47]

This willingness to take on the often tedious and onerous tasks of branch or workplace organisation was part of a clear strategy involving the development of a positive identity for the Party in the eyes of the ordinary working man. Key to this process was the increasing influence the Party was able to exercise over the post of shop steward. With trade union organisation increasingly built around national bargaining, local representatives who were able to articulate the fears and aspirations of workers at factory and workplace level often became the driving force behind local strikes and

[46] John McIlroy *Notes on the Communist Party and industrial politics* in John McIlroy et al *The high tide of British trade unionism* (Monmouth, Merlin Press, 2007)
[47] Nina Fishman pp102-103

unofficial action. Where full-time trade union officials were (fairly or unfairly) seen as collaborators with employers, locally elected lay shop stewards with CP allegiances were able to step forward and claim solidarity with the workers.[48] The key message of the Communist Party was that it could be trusted to know whose side it was on; it would be an organisation not just *for* ordinary working people but *of* them. They would champion the working man not just against the employer but against the untrustworthy full-time union leadership, who would be prepared, at crucial times, to betray them.

The ability of the CP to move in and fill the gaps in trade union organisation at the local level had the effect of creating two very different narratives about the nature and purpose of union activity. The trade union hierarchies, supported by the Labour Party, saw their organisations as essential cogs in the machinery of the capitalist system and interpreted their task as bureaucratic and regulatory - dedicated to the defence of their members against flagrant acts of unfairness in the workplace, the upholding of standards of living, the improvement of the ability of the worker to be a good, well-rewarded and content member of society and, crucially, the overall well-being of the business. These objectives, which were essentially about stability rather than revolution, were ones which could also be shared by the employers and by Government even if there was occasional disagreement about how to achieve these ends. The Communist Party, supported by a range of other critical voices from the Trotskyite Left,[49]were able to paint this approach as revisionist and a betrayal of the the working class. The seeming willingness of the full time trade union officers to find reasons to distance themselves from their membership and to demonstrate an apparent eagerness to become part of the political establishment allowed the CP to create a persuasive and compelling story of the essentially noble (potentially revolutionary) working man always in danger of being betrayed by ambitious,

[48] See James Hinton 'The Communist Party, Production and Britain's Post-war Settlement' in Geoff Andrews et al *Opening the Books* Op. Cit. pp160-175 for a full discussion of these issues.
[49] See for example the argument advanced in Tony Cliff The Bureaucracy Today *International Socialism* Series 1 No. 48 June 1971.

striving and upwardly mobile full-time union officers. The way in which this particular idea was constructed and shaped is an issue that will be returned to in more detail later in this study but at this point it provides an important back-drop to the next stage in the development of CPGB strategy.

John McIlroy's analysis of the role of the CP[50] confirms the importance to the Party's strategy of this narrative involving the politics of betrayal and, he suggests, they were happy to seize the opportunity to extend their accusations of treachery to the wider Labour Movement. The election of a Labour government following World War Two was a considerable shock to the political establishment but the hopes of the Left that this would signal radical social change were frustrated. The programme adopted by Labour was interpreted by the Left as a relatively modest programme of reform that became characterised as a lost opportunity to engage in a much more radical transformation of the country. This disillusionment with Labour was interpreted by CP strategists as an opportunity to reach out to the disaffected and in so doing swell their own membership numbers. This occasioned a reassessment of their strategy for developing a mass membership and their 1951 General Election manifesto[51] embodied a change in rhetoric away from the revolutionary and towards building an alternative electoral base from which to launch the transition to socialism. It was envisaged that this would be achieved through a three-pronged strategy involving the building of a mass movement that would be influential outside of Parliament; an alliance with the interests of small business and elements of the middle class; and, a partnership with a radicalised Labour Party. It would be, the manifesto states, the role of trade union members to undertake this radicalisation of the Labour Party.

> The present leadership of the Labour Party is disrupting the Labour Movement[.....]In order, therefore, to bring about a decisive change

[50] John McIlroy p217
[51] No author *The British Road to Socialism* (London, CPGB, 1951)

> in Britain, the millions of workers in the trade unions, co-operatives and individual members' sections of the Labour Party will have to use their political strength to make it impossible for either right-wing Labour leaders or the Tories to carry out their present pernicious policy.[52]

These strategic decisions by the CPGB form the context and provide the environment for the emergence in the 1950s of a number of novels featuring trade union action as the central plot device. The majority of these novels reflect a series of important assumptions : firstly, an acceptance within the storyline that being active in a trade union is, at least, a duty and at its best, a calling and is necessary as a way of giving substance to working class concerns and aspirations ; that the action and the characters portrayed in the novel need to speak directly to the shop-floor worker about their role in the new socialist order; and that the books should reflect the Party's official commitment to a literature of socialist realism as a form most suited to promulgating its ideology.

Novels from within the Soviet tradition of socialist realism

As suggested earlier, the debate about what constituted the 'right' kind of literature to carry the socialist message had been a cause of schism amongst the Party's writers ever since the 1934 Soviet Writers Congress. For the most part, and especially when the political tide seemed to be flowing in the favour of the CP, this potential conflict had been largely hidden away from general view but, in the post-war years as anti-Soviet sentiment began to emerge and as the Cold War took shape, this issue again became a key point of conflict. Andy Croft, in his essay on attitudes to literature within the CP, sees it this way:

[52] Ibid pp15-16

> In fact, the Party's attitude to literary culture was never settled, always a point of fierce internal engagement. There was a continual tension between the instincts of the apparatus and the needs of writers who had to take their writing, their concerns, anger and imagination way beyond the party and into the crowded market-place of the imagination. [53]

By 1952 the Executive Committee of the CPGB were urging authors to 'produce works related to the British working-class struggle and based on the standpoint of Socialist realism'[54]and were prepared to reform their various in-house journals to reflect this kind of writing. The newly reshaped literary magazine that emerged from this was titled *Daylight* and its editor, Margot Heinemann, was charged with providing a 'vehicle for the fight to develop a Marxist attitude in relation to literature and art.'[55] The fact that there were relatively few mainstream publishing houses with an interest in nurturing writers with an explicitly CP agenda meant that *Daylight* was significant and influential in shaping the output of a generation of proletarian writers. Several of these were subsequently given deals for the publication of novels by the Party's publishing house, Lawrence and Wishart. From 1956 – 1964 Lawrence and Wishart published a number of novels that conformed to the model of socialist realism envisaged by *Daylight's* editorial board and the Party's Executive Committee but, with the exception of Len Doherty's *Miner's Son* (which sold over 3,000 copies) they were such a commercial disaster (in some cases selling as few as 600 copies) that the publishing house ended their fiction list by the middle of the 1960s.[56]

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[53] Andy Croft *Authors take sides : writers and the Communist Party 1920-1956* in Geoff Andrews et al *Opening the books* (London: Pluto Press, 1995) p91

[54] Andy Croft *The end of social realism: Margot Heinemann's The Adventurers* in David Margolis and Maoula Joannou *Heart of the Heartless World : essays in cultural resistance in memory of Margot Heinemann* (London, Pluto Press,1995) p198

[55] Ibid p199

[56] Ibid p201

Gary Saul Morson[57] suggests that attempts to critique socialist realist novels have tended to focus on a number of characteristics that are viewed as largely negative by the Western European literary establishment. It is common, he claims, for these novels to be accused of consisting of, in some combination, two-dimensional characters, formulaic plotting, inappropriate themes, political sermonising, a lack of irony and mandatory happy endings. Morson, however, argues that the Soviet model of socialist realism looks like it does because Soviet authors adopted the literary conventions they were most familiar with – those of Russian pre-revolutionary texts:

> Like all systems, literatures usually assimilate (make similar) first that which already *is* similar. Indeed, Said's description of the functions of literature and the concept of authorship in Arabic countries would apply to the Soviet Union and the Bolshevik world view as well. In Russia, too, the author is, in the root sense, an augmenter of given truths rather than a creator of new ones.[58]

Morson's contention that Soviet models of Socialist Realism obey literary conventions lifted from pre-revolutionary Russian models of novel writing may help to explain why the Communist Party in Moscow had difficulty exporting this model to its satellite organisations in the West – including the CPGB – and why the novels conforming to this model of Socialist Realism had seemingly little appeal to a mass readership.

Later criticisms of the books written to conform with the Zhdanov model of socialist realism have largely been in sympathy with the critique developed by Lukács and highlight the range of negative characteristics identified by Morson. Andy Croft also draws attention to the fact that several of these novels of socialist realism set the action of their stories in a pre-war past – a device which prevents the author from having to confront the

[57] Gary Saul Morson Socialist Realism and Literary Theory *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol.38, No.2 (Winter, 1979) pp121-133
[58] Ibid p132

difficult realities facing the CP in the mid-to-late 1950s and he takes a broadly dismissive tone when discussing these examples of socialist realism:

> Unsurprisingly, they were all written in the earnest style so enjoyed by *Daylight,* romantic party novels about life, work and politics in the factory, shipyard and pit, jolly dramatisations of the The British Road to Socialism.[59]

The criticism that, taken as a body of work, the novels are two-dimensional both in terms of plot and character development has some substance. The characters that stand for and articulate the message of communism are invariably portrayed as good and decent people, wise beyond their years – we can see this in the depiction of Robert Mellers in *The Miner's Son ,* for example - or, they are imbued with the sagacity of age as typified by the character of Robert Broon, the central character's mentor in *Stewartie*.[60] As David Smith quite rightly notes, the books can at times read 'like a manual on how the good Communist Party member should behave.'[61]

It can also be argued, fairly I would suggest, that the scope and sweep of the action is very narrow and rather domestic. There is very little attempt to deal with the great national political debates or with issues of world history on a grand scale and it is difficult at times to locate with any accuracy the time and space in which the action is taking place. Ingrid von Rosenberg comments on the way in which the novels tend to deal with a range of very limited or parochial issues:

> The political issues are, in contrast to some novels of the 1930s, of rather a small scale: usually they consist of strikes, mostly 'wildcat'

[59] Andy Croft Op. Cit. 1995 p201
[60] Robert Bonnar *Stewartie* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964)
[61] David Smith *Socialist propaganda in the twentieth-century novel* (London, Macmillan, 1978) p147

> strikes, caused by grievances arising from the immediate working conditions of the protagonists.[62]

Whilst it is certainly true that these novels do not try to engage with the any grand historical panormas what Rosenberg sees as a weakness can be construed, from another perspective, as one of the major appeals of these books. It is likely that amongst the individuals that might be expected to make up the readership for novels of this kind would be active trade unionists and, amongst them, shop stewards and for this group in particular a focus on the 'immediate working conditions of the protagonists' is likely to be of real interest to them. Even though this might represent a very restricted potentential readership,these novels do at the very least show an understanding of the world of work and workplace relationships that demonstrate that the writers have an intimate understanding of the environments they describe. Herbert Smith's novel *A morning to remember*[63] is a good example of this approach. Set in a power station, the action centres around an industrial accident caused by the cavalier approach by management towards health and safety. The novel is built around detail – both of the working environment, the workers themselves and the threats they face and this is captured in the details of the environment where the 'thick pipes wandered off…and small piles of discarded lagging look(ing) like snow' [64] litter the floor. In this world the workers boots clang on metal ladders and 'chubby fingers clasp the rungs'.[65]

These workplaces are visceral and the prose conveys the sights, sounds and smalls of the small everyday dramas of the workplace. It may not be world history but it's the working man's everyday history whenever he clocks on for his shift. This evident understanding of the working environment and the

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[62] Ingrid von Rosenberg *Militancy, anger and resignation: alternative moods in the working-class novel of the 1950s and early 1960s* in H.Gustav Klaus *The socialist novel in Britain* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1982) p152

[63] Herbert Smith *A Morning To Remember* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1962)

[64] Ibid p14

[65] Ibid p

workforce is also matched by their knowledge of workplace trade union structures and the day to day reality of local branch activity. David Lambert's *He Must So Live..*[66]draws attention to the range of skills demanded of the shop steward when dealing with volatile workplace disputes. Jock Harris, the local steward, and McBain, the Regional Organiser, seek to settle an unofficial walk-out and Lambert shows them as subtle negotiators capable of both coaxing a reluctant and angry workforce back to work and then able to adopt a more confrontational and partisan attitude towards the negotiation with management for the reinstatement of a dismissed worker.[67]

These books are able to speak directly to the activist about day-to-day concerns and recognisable situations. In reality very few workplace stewards would find themselves at the centre of a major national dispute but they would expect to have day by day involvement in smaller, local disputes. Activists might be expected to want this reality presented in a way that dramatized situations they recognise whilst at the same time entertaining them as readers. Unlike the prosaic nature of the trade union rule books or manuals, novels of this kind made it possible for the union activist to engage with the idealism or aspirations of the workers at an imaginative rather than functional level.

It seems clear that these novels were written to conform to a quite specific model – written by working people, informed by their real life experiences and engaging with stories that describe a narrow and yet identifiable world view. However, this naturally raises the question of whether these novels could ever find a wider readership beyond the narrow base of CP and trade union members. Len Doherty's *A Miner's Son* [68] was, by some distance, the best selling book in the Lawrence and Wishart fiction catalogue and even in this relatively well received novel, the formula remains essentially the same. Published in 1955, this novel deals with a small mining community in the

[66] David Lambert *He Must So Live.*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956)
[67] Ibid pp172 - 177
[68] Len Doherty *A Miner's Son* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955)

fictional village of Mainworth shortly after the nationalisation of the coal mines and explores both the domestic relationships of the Mellers family and their bonds with their friends and their comrades in the Communist Party. Rosenberg's observation that the focus of action is often 'grievances arising from immediate working conditions' could be applied directly to this novel. The second half of the book, dealing with a work-to-rule and overtime ban mounted in response to threats to reduce wages, culminates in a minor pit accident that results one of the miners having his legs crushed. However, this strand of the book lacks any significant tension or dramatic impact and the victim, Sammy, although the target of sympathy is never the real focus of the incident and merits only a cursory valediction:

> 'Aye, they reckon the poor lad's legs in a mess', Mrs. Mellers went on with a shudder. There was deep sympathy and pity in her voice. 'They reckon he'll not walk on *them* again.'[69]

It seems clear that Doherty's real interest does not lie in dramatic set-piece action but more in the way in which the characters develop, relate to each other in the context of the workplace and demonstrate qualities illustrative of the best aspects of Communism, especially its capacity to build moral fibre. Robert Mellers, for example, is taken on a journey of personal development which sees him transformed from an impulsive firebrand – his prison sentence was for the involuntary manslaughter of a corrupt union official – to someone able to return to work in the pits as the figurehead of the Party and given the benediction of the Party's moral arbiter, Wells who tells him that prison was a place where 'Ye proved yourself'.[70] In parallel with this idea that there is potential nobility in the justified breaking of the law, his status in the family also rises when he recruits his increasingly wayward brother into the Party and persuades his ailing father to quit the pit before it kills him.

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[69] Ibid p186
[70] Ibid p243

In many ways this novel draws on the commonly held perception of mining communities as almost hermetically-sealed worlds with their own rules[71]with the fictional Mainworth painted as a tight-knit and, in some ways, parochial community or extended family. Doherty is manifestly more interested in the personal politics of his characters than he is on set-piece events, forcing the reader to focus on the tight bond that exists within the membership of the Communist Party:

> Forty of them – bringing their message to more than forty thousand. One small group in one small industrial town and yet – this was a symbol of all the groups in all the country that were coming out[.....] And beyond the shores of the country there was the continent and beyond that the world[.....] the few were speaking to the multitude.[72]

As David Smith notes, 'although he says the branch is small, the impression conveyed[....] is precisely the opposite'.[73] In many ways this small CP branch is presented as the moral centre of the pit and the community, behaving as if it is one big family. Although the members often struggle with the decisions they make and the ambiguities of their relationships, Doherty makes it clear that answers can always be found by committing to and relying on the collective wisdom of the Party. Indeed, Mellers' brother, Herbert, who is in danger of losing his way – he is consumed by the lack of purpose in his life and on the road to becoming an unpleasant drunkard – eventually finds his salvation in Party membership[74].

[71] An idea more fully explored in Section 4 of this study when the literature of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike is examined
[72] Ibid p93
[73] David Smith op. cit. p147
[74] Doherty p194

The ability of the Party to act as a moral compass also comes to the aid of Barratt, the pit's trade union organiser, and former member of the Party. Although he has given up his membership, Barratt is treated sympathetically by Doherty who gives him a significant part to play at the end of the novel. The solidarity demonstrated by Doherty's refusal to be seduced by management's blandishments despite the obvious temptations – 'no man could say he was eternally incorruptible'[75] – underline the key message of the CPGB's core recruitment strategy that ultimately he would return to his proper 'home' in the Party.

It is worth noting that the moral dimension and a belief that the tenets of Communism can be equated with social and personal recitutude dominatesthe novel. The action often depicts the Party members meeting outside of work to discuss Party and trade union business but there is surprisingly little discussion of Marxist theory or even basic economics. It is the Party's role as the custodian of social value and the regulator of personal behaviour that features most significantly. When Mellers is challenged to set out what he sees as the kind of society that would replace capitalism, his answer does not focus on material improvements but on a kind of spiritual utopianism:

> It would have all that men wanted for men to enjoy...When men count more than just what profits they represent, when all men have equal right to develop as they want, they're given room to find themselves.[76]

This emphasis on personal fulfilment and social justice rather than the practicalities of industrial strife, wage demands and class struggle may be a consequence of where the CPGB itself stood politically in the UK at the time the novel was written. Ingrid von Rosenberg comments that 'perhaps this was

[75] Ibid p262
[76] Ibid p135

meant to be a clever policy in the age of affluence'[77]and that there was nothing much to be gained by trying to stir 'the fairly saturated British working class of the 1950s'.[78] Given the Party's explicit commitment to a style of fiction that promotes its political agenda, it is understandable that critics like von Rosenberg see Doherty's decision to focus on the dynamics of personal and intra-professional relationships as a deliberate strategic ploy designed to appeal to a readership that is otherwise less susceptible to direct political propagandising. However, such an interpretation attributes motives to the author which are not necessarily borne out by content of the novel. Although the book is clearly meant to promote the CP view of the world, *A Miner's Son* is very much the product of an author who has been shaped by and understands, physically and emotionally, the environment about which he is writing. Doherty takes an almost journalistic approach to describing the conditions in the pit itself and the easy relationship between the miners, focussing on his familiarity with the geography of the pits and the way the miners navigated the dark tunnels with ease:

> There was plenty of room to sit and sprawl on the dust-covered floor on either side of the rails. There were few travelling-roads as good as this one in the pit.[79]

This approach, strongly reminiscent of Orwell's descriptions of working life in a mine,[80]demonstrates not only his familiarity with the geography of the pit but his understanding of the significance of this place of relative safety for miners who want a brief respite from the dangers they face.

Christine Wall describes the 'image of the miner, blackened from coal dust and emerging into the daylight' as '*the* iconic representation of the

[77] Ingrid von Rosenberg Op. Cit. p154
[78] Ibid p154
[79] Doherty p80
[80] See chapter two of George Orwell *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London : Gollancz, 1937)

heroic male manual worker'[81]and, as noted by William Thesing, depictions of the physical prowess of the miner have featured prominently in the writing of authors such as Zola, Lawrence and Orwell and in wider cultural arenas like photography and documentary film making.[82]Doherty's own description of the miners is very much in this tradition and his admiration for their physical prowess is made clear right at the beginning of the novel:

> The collier bends from the hips, his legs wide apart and rigid, his back a fraction from the roof, and his bare, gleaming black body weaves quickly and rhythmically.[83]

Doherty's familiarity with the miners in their pit setting is similar to that noted earlier in Herbert Smith's writing. The novel uses a language and knowledge of detail he has gleaned from his own time as a miner and this comes through in the detail of the way the men use a turn of phrase or in his understanding of the perils inherent in the pit where 'a long crack you could put your fingers in..would have to be propped up before the coal could be removed.[84]

This understanding of the industrial environment and the men who work in it is also evident in Doherty's second novel, *The Man Beneath,*[85] published in 1957 and which focuses more explicitly on the subject of the pitman and what makes him special. Again the action centres around an accident - in this case a situation where a miner is trapped for several hours in a roof-fall - during which time he reviews his life, ideas and ideals. Although the novel was less commercially successful than *A Miner's Son,*

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[81] Christine Wall *'All Downtrodden With Work': Personal, Public and Political Images of Miners and Mining 1920-1970 (*unpublished paper, 2008) p1

[82] William B. Thesing *Caverns of Night: Coal Mines in Art, Literature and Film* (South Carolina: USC Press, 2000) pp xi -xxii

[83] Doherty p5

[84] Ibid p180

[85] Len Doherty *The Man Beneath* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1957)

Doherty brings to it the same qualities of detailed observation of the mine and the working practices of the miners that were evident in his first novel. His interest is more about the nature of comradeship and personal commitment, expressed through the ideals of union membership, than it is about the details of industrial strife and injustice. There is an almost visceral sense of fellow-feeling engendered by the common cause of trade unionism captured in the book and this infuses the key characters with a warmth that is reflected in the sun as it 'flowed golden through the beer on the tables'.[86]

Doherty places this idea of a brotherhood born from adversity that is both protective and inclusive to his next at the very heart of *A Miner's Son.* The forging of this kind of trade union camaraderie is most noticeable at the workplace or local branch level and, as a result, it is common for local branch committees of national trade unions to feel remote from their parent organisations and for there to be an inherent suspicion about the motives of national union officials who are often seen as running their own separate agendas.[87] This sense that the union, at a local level, is fighting its own hierarchy in addition to those of Government and employer finds its expression in the novel through the character of Wells, the CP branch organiser who has become cynical of the way in which the national officers collude with bigger political party agendas – using 'every piece of political trickery'[88] - to by-pass the express wishes of local branch delegates.

For the CPGB this narrative of disconnected, unrepresentative union officials betraying or selling out the grass roots was a key piece in the overall propaganda jigsaw. This feeling of the ordinary working man fighting against the odds is often a real source of solidarity at a local level and can build a sense of common purpose and identity within a local membership. Rick Fantasia's study of what he calls 'cultures of solidarity' notes that the idea

[86] Ibid p126
[87] For a more detailed discussion see Sheila Cohen *Ramparts of Resistance: Why workers lost their power and how to get it back* (London: Pluto Press, 2006) pp149-173
[88] Doherty op. cit. p41

that 'a injury to one is an injury to all' has been a defining message of union organisation throughout its history[89]. This message was something that would have been recognised within the CPGB at this time given their commitment to working on the inside of the trade union movement in order to change policy within the TUC and the Labour Party 'because it's in the unions that we'll make ourselves heard in the end, and its in the union branches we'll have to fight the hardest'.[90]

By contrast with the untrustworthiness of the trade unions at a national level, the local branch union organisation is seen as something that can be depended on; to some extent because of the benign influence of the CP but also because at the local level peer pressure will sort out the decent from the unprincipled. This peer-to-peer regulation of what is decent and acceptable is, in fact, at the heart of the incident that sent Mellers to jail and when he eventually recounts the events of that evening it is set firmly in a context of outraged decency:

> Mathews really turned "gaffers man". He started carrying tales to the office so that we had to watch our steps....for a month we sent him to Coventry....Mathews was in a hell of a mood. They blocked my way and began to get tough. Mathews was swearing – real pit stuff – and my girl was stood there having to listen to it all. I got nasty too then.....he took a swing at me and hit me in the face....I let him have it full blast and then I hit him such a clip he smashed his head on the pavement.[91]

Although Mellers regrets his time in jail, there is no real suggestion in the book that he regrets the death of his nemesis. Doherty paints Mathews as having crossed a moral threshold which makes what happened to him

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[89] Rick Fantasia *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action and American Workers* (Berkeley: UCP, 1988) p5
[90] Doherty p41
[91] Doherty p48

legitimate and Mellers' actions, questionable as they are, heroic. He is seen to stand up for the values of personal decency by forcibly silencing a man who is not only socially belligerent but, probably, politically treacherous. Indeed, the emergence of Barratt as the alternative to Matthews as the local branch steward demonstrates the way in which Doherty suggests that moral fibre and basic decency either comes from, or draws you towards, the Communist Party.

The idea that membership of the Communist Party, and by extension the trade union movement, can provide some kind of moral framework on which to base personal and workplace behaviour has the effect of making *A Miner's Son* feel almost like a religious parable rather than a piece of political or ideological propagandising. The Party not only peoples the book with almost universally admirable characters, it also provides the key ethical framework by which a whole series of personal and professional relationships can be mediated. Joining the CP is seen as a path to some kind of personal, even spiritual salvation, that will always be there as the bedrock or the benchmark against which to judge your own and other peoples' behaviour.

This central idea that between them membership of the CP and the trade union movement provide all the benefits of a tight and protective family can also be found in the other novels of socialist realism produced by writers coming from a background in industry and in active trade unionism. David Lambert's *He Must So* Live… set on the Clydeside and exploring the daily struggles of the foundry workers in the pre-war years, Herbert Smith's *Field of Folk* and *A morning to remember* and David Lambert's second novel, *No time for sleeping* ,[92] all rely on a similar format in which local working lives and the day to day experience of the workplace are presented, often in some detail – with descriptions of machinery, working routines and inter-personal relationships between workers all being represented. Trade unionism is depicted as part and parcel of that everyday working environment and the

[92] David Lambert *No time for sleeping* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1958)

industrial disputes that are incorporated into the story do not involve major set-piece strikes or lockouts but are ones that the 'ordinary' working man would recognise as part of their everyday experience. The CP members who inhabit these books are models to be admired or emulated - wise, warm, loyal and even heroic when called upon to be so. Rosenberg notes that the Communists in these books are solid citizens almost to the point of disbelief - ' Warm-hearted, friendly, always ready to advise, help and sacrifice, responsible, fearless, good organisers, they combine all good qualities required for the supreme working class virtue of solidarity'.[93]

It is difficult to know whether the very narrow range of plot lines or the rather two-dimensional characterisation played a significant part in relatively low sales these books achieved but the decision by Lawrence and Wishart to withdraw from the publishing of fiction because of low sales figures and the sharp downturn in CPGB membership meant that Robert Bonnar's *Stewartie*[94] could be seen as representing the end of this strand of Zhdanov-influenced socialist realism within the CPGB tradition. Although this book appears almost eight years after *A Miner's Son,* it makes no attempt to acknowledge that the world into which the book would launch was wholly different to the environment in which Doherty had been writing in 1955. By the beginning of the 1960s the CPGB was in precipitous decline following a number of significant international events, including the death of Stalin, the subsequent challenge to his reputation mounted by Khrushchev and the invasion of Hungary. All of this turmoil led to the asking of fundamental questions:

> The loyalists were confronted with Party members who could no longer see the need for a Communist Party and no longer believed in the Soviet Union. But there were many who wanted a different sort of

[93] Ingrid von Rosenberg op cit. p153
[94] Robert Bonnar *Stewartie* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1964)

> Marxist organisation – more democratic, more pluralistic and more concerned with its relevance to Britain.[95]

However, Bonner shows us none of this tension. He avoids these political inconveniences by setting his story at the beginning of the Second World War where the central character, Bert Stewart (Stewartie), has just been given his first job as a railway-man at a depot in the Scottish town of Fife. As with Smith's *A Morning To Remember* or Doherty's *The Man Beneath* the climax of the action is not some kind of industrial dispute or strike action brought about by management greed or the failure of capitalism but an industrial accident in which Stewartie proves the heroic nobility of his Communism by risking his own life to save a fellow worker who has previously been antagonistic towards the Party. Descending into a sump where an engine wagon threatens to crush Christie, an unlikeable fellow worker and union branch officer, Stewartie is drawn with almost mythical awe and majesty which is strongly reminiscent of the way in which the coal miner was often seen as an idealised example of the working man – at the same time drawing Stakhanovite awe and homo-erotic admiration.[96] Bonner emphasises the Stewartie's physical fortitude in holding up a falling loco-wagon to save his co-worker and the pain he is prepared to endure as he is 'pinned hard against the wall of the sump' is graphically conveyed.[97]However, it is also clear to the reader that Stewartie's fortitude isn't just the result of dumb physical strength but born of a deep-seated moral and ethical superiority which is itself born of his commitment to the CP cause.

Bonnar makes Stewartie as fearless in challenging the duplicity and corruption of his local trade union officials as he is in facing physical danger. When the Party members fear that the branch union officers, including Christie, are doing a deal with management to undermine the working hours agreement

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[95] John Callaghan Op Cit. p44

[96] A more detailed discussion of the way the miner was physically lionised can be found in Section Four of this dissertation.

[97] Robert Bonnar op cit. p242

they have, it is Stewartie that makes the challenge and he does this by once again calling on the moral case for protecting the working conditions of men who have been away fighting fascism -

> …it is our responsibility to see to it that we safeguard the workin' conditions o' the lads wha are away fightin' so that they'll have them to come home to.[98]

Stewartie typifies the way in which the Zhdanov-inspired novels of socialist realism that were produced during this period mythologize both the Communist Party and the trade union activist. Whilst this is clearly their purpose - they are designed to provide inspirational ideological direction for the ordinary working man - the uniformity and, at times, crassness of the message can pall quickly. It is also clear that the value of these books as an exercise in propaganda has to be questioned if they fail to reach the audience they were meant to influence. The relative success Len Doherty was able to achieve in terms of numbers of books sold was not matched by any of the other authors and there is little evidence that these novels circulated much beyond a very small group of political and trade union activists looking for confirmation of their views rather than any challenge to orthodoxy.

It can also be argued that, as politically committed as these novelists were, their ability to engage with a complicated range of social and personal issues was strictly limited. None of the books develop convincing or complex female characters who evolve beyond the stereotypical domestic or domiciliary role mapped out for them as supporters of their menfolk. On top of this, the books lack any real sense of historical context and fail to locate the action in any contemporary issues of the day. The period between 1950 and 1964 was a time of major international and domestic change but it would be hard to guess that from these books where time seems to have been suspended in order to create an infinite moment of opportunity for the CP.

[98] Ibid p160

The commercial decision made by Lawrence and Wishart to suspend publication of a fiction list following the publication of Bonnar's novel supports the idea that this strand of socialist realism had reached something of a dead-end in terms of readership. The inability of these novels to respond to the changing political realities that were gathering speed around them made their strict adherence to a model of writing, crafted in Moscow to suit the needs of a very different audience, seem at odds with the concerns of a British readership.

However, as suggested earlier, another tradition of novel writing existed within the membership of the CPGB which drew its inspiration from Lukács' conceptualisation of what he called Critical Realism – a fictional form that positively embraced reflections of current history and encouraged the author to engage with contemporary debate about future directions for socialism. Novelists working in this tradition included Jack Lindsay and, ironically, Margot Heinemann, whose editorship of Daylight had been so divisive in the early 1950s. Ingrid von Rosenberg suggests that that these authors are different to those socialist realists already discussed in two important respects – they are middle-class rather than proletarian and are 'professional writers' or 'intellectual novelist[s] writing about aspects of working class life from a socialist point of view'.[99] Rosenberg's dismissal of the proletarian tradition of socialist realism as a sort of amateur propagandising is, in the light of the analysis that has gone before, clearly too simplistic but it is certainly true that Lindsay and Heinemann represent a very different approach to promoting the socialist message and, in the process, produced a very different way of talking about the way the trade unions might be involved in bringing about a socialist future.

[99] Ingrid von Rosenberg Op. Cit. p150

A different kind of realism

Born in 1900 and Australian by birth, Jack Lindsay was a prolific author of fiction and non-fiction who spent the majority of his adult life in the UK. He joined the CPGB at the end of the 1930s and became a key player in the development of the Party's cultural strategy. However, the decision by the Party to throw its full weight behind the adherence to socialist realism, as embodied in the *Daylight* magazine edited by Margot Heinemann, resulted in Lindsay becoming marginalised. His own journal *Arena* was closed down and Croft observes that:

> Announcing the launch of *Daylight,* Emile Burns took care to emphasise the break with those writers like Randall Swingler, Jack Lindsay and Edgell Rickword, who had been involved in *Our Time* and *Arena* (and indeed all the Party's literary publications since the early 1930s). *Daylight* was "NOT a journal for a clique", he insisted.[100]

Between 1953 and 1964 Lindsay published a series of nine novels he called 'novels of the British Way' in which he attempted to write what was, effectively, a proletarian history of the post war years. Lindsay's reputation until this point had largely rested upon his historical novels and factual re-enactments which had also reimagined past events from the perspective of the outsider, the radical or the oppressed classes[101] and although this novel sequence deals with very recent history in looking back less than ten years to 1945, it can be seen as a logical extension of his approach to novel writing. Although writing as a member of the CPGB it is clear that Lindsay does not want to produce the same kind of realism envisaged by authors like Doherty or Bonnar. Lindsay's version of socialist realism might be more accurately called critical realism (*pace* Lukàcs) and would seek to embrace a wider

[100] Andy Croft 1995 Op. Cit. p199

[101] See the analysis of Graham Stevenson http://www.grahamstevenson.me.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=351:jack-lindsay-&catid=12:l&Itemid=113

world view, locating the role of the political activist in a changing world order and acknowledging that the Left had to confront and accommodate alternative views about the governance of the country.

For Lindsay, as had been the case with the other socialist realist novelists, membership of the CP and trade union activism went hand-in-hand. Whatever disagreements existed between Lindsay and the CPGB executive when it came to artistic freedom and the role of the writer, there was no difference of opinion on the central tenet of the key part the trade union movement would have in creating a new radical coalition that would bring the CP greater electoral influence. Lindsay's commitment to the notion that the trade union movement should be a natural home for any member of the CP and that union activism should lead organically to a broadening and deepening of political awareness amongst its membership, is most evident in the first four books of the British Way series – *Betrayed Spring, Rising Tide, The Moment of Choice, A Local Habitation* - which Ingrid von Rosenberg calls 'a natural tetralogy, covering the years 1945-51'.[102] The choice of dates is, of course, significant in that the action depicted in the four books falls entirely within the first period of post-war government by the Labour Party and acts in many ways as a critique of that administration. The very choice of the title for the opening book in the sequence, *Betrayed Spring*[103], relates to the wider CPGB analysis of that period as a lost opportunity. Lindsay clearly believed that the British working class had arrived at a moment of potential radicalism and that this urge for major social change had been betrayed by a Labour Government which remained, according to the CPGB, under the sway of the establishment. Giving voice to this deep-seated frustration was at the heart of the British Way series and so committed was Lindsay to producing a true reflection of working class life that he enlisted workers in the co-production of the novels. David Smith, using material from Lindsey's own letters, describes it in this way:

[102] Ingrid von Rosenberg op.cit. p150
[103] Jack Lindsay *Betrayed Spring* (London: Bodley Head, 1953)

> ...whereas his historical fiction relied on historical documents, Lindsay has here used the active aid of the workers;[.....]Lindsay discussed many of the incidents with workers while actually writing the book, and then later had relevant sections read by workers best in a position to assess their accuracy.[104]

The books provide a tableau of recent history which ranges widely over a complex network of social policy, sexual and gender politics and conflicting ideologies. The four books embrace explorations of class conflict, housing and homelessness, the Peace Movement, the changing role of the family, the role of the middle-class intellectual, the nature of the Labour movement and, of course, trade unionism. Trade union membership and the responsibilities that arise from this are woven through all of the novels and touch the lives of the key characters in important but differing ways.

Betrayed Spring, the first novel in the series, sets up four concurrent plot lines that will play out as the series unfolds. By running four separate stories set in different geographical locations across the country, Lindsay is able to present us with a set of characters, with very different backgrounds and very different social and political characteristics, all of whom are at a moment where they have difficult choices to make about the future or are on the cusp of a profound life change. The individual story lines are prevented from becoming completely individual, self-contained episodes by the interweaving of historical events and by introducing individuals who cross over from one storyline to another. The key figure in this respect is the Communist Harry Manson who plays a role in all four sections and is particularly important in both the London and Lancashire strands where the speeches he makes galvanise the central characters into action and provide

[104] David Smith op. Cit. p138

them with a 'sense of confidence, of opening horizons, of great movements and significant clashes. A feeling of history[…]'.[105]

The scope of Lindsey's novels, although rooted very much in the detail of everyday life, is notably wider than the very confined world of work explored by writers like Doherty or Bonner. The reader is always aware of a wider social, political and economic environment in which the characters move and his protagonists are complex and clearly on a developmental journey. The character of Phyl Tremaine provides us with an interesting window on the way Lindsey saw the emergent post-war working class and offers an interesting contrast with the heroic figures that populate those novels in the Zhadonov tradition of socialist realism. Tremaine, a young woman in the first novel in the series, *Betrayed Spring,* is both hedonistic – she sees her time in a squat as 'ever so much fun while it lasted'[106] – and in some way spiritually empty. The desire to be involved, albeit peripherally, with the spirit of the times sees her drawn to the excitement of a hotel workers strike – more for its novelty than because she has understood the issues involved. Lindsey draws her as a character with a powerful but latent desire to find a cause she can join and invest emotion in and this makes her impatient with her family but also suspicious of the commitment and authenticity of her friends who she cannot trust to be anything other than dilettante in their attitude to the real world.

Lindsey's understanding that people are draw to causes for multiple and complex reasons that they cannot articulate is clearly an important aspect of Phyl Tremaine's character. For a younger generation seeking to reject the mores of a generation that took them through a second world war, the labour movement and the daring and confrontational nature of strike action not only offered individuals a way to access an exciting world outside the narrow confines of shared rooms and unemployment but it also hinted at a wider

[105] *Betrayed Spring* pp. 413-414
[106] Ibid p22

world that was possible – not just in the physical realm but in the world of ideas and ideology. Post-war Britain, Lindsay seems to be saying, will need to be different; it will be a world of young people striving for something better but also something bigger in terms of possibilities. Phyl Tremaine's internal monologue is dominated by the almost dazzling way commitment opens up the world of political possibilities. Her memories of her first march to Hyde Park is described as 'beautiful and remote and unrelated to her problems, becoming more and more like a techni-colour film.'[107]

But political awareness is not, for Lindsay at least, just about epiphany but about apprenticeship – hard work and a willingness to be part of something at a street level takes a person only so far. Ultimately, proximity to the strike and to the rhetoric and argument the strikers engage in – prompted by CP organisers like Harry Manson – gives Phyl a greater awareness of what is valuable and worthwhile and awakens her working class consciousness but significantly only at what David Smith calls 'the level of intuition'.[108] Although she longs for the camaraderie that membership of the CP or the union can offer, she always feels outside of the circle.

In this portrait of Phyl Tremaine Lindsey is saying something important about his interpretation of the nature of political consciousness. It's not enough to respond to events through a visceral or even the common sense commitment, there also has to be a level of intellectual engagement and a capacity to understand the implications of that theory. By the end of the book, it is clear that Phyl's journey to full political awareness will take something more than just listening to rousing speeches:

> Phyl was bewildered trying to follow the intricacies of the discussion. She seemed to understand it all while the words were flying about, but as soon as she tried to recall what had been said, she

[107] Ibid p224
[108] David Smith Op. Cit. p139

found that nothing had left a clear mark. Some key understanding was absent and until she gained it, she'd go on being bewildered.[109]

This interpretation of what constitutes true political consciousness is very different to what we have encountered so far. What Lindsey demands in terms of both emotional *and* intellectual could be seen as elitist when set against the very different attitude we see in *Stewartie* or *A Miner's Son* where class interest and the willingness to fight (literally) for that is the most admired and prized attribute. For Lindsey *understanding* the conditions of the working class and why they are in the position they are is as important as *feeling* the injustice. At the end of *Betrayed Spring,* Phyl is working in a cafe near the London docks and has become involved with one of the young dockers, Jeff Burrows. At the intuitive level mentioned by Smith, she has found a sense of place and purpose where 'tremendous forces [are] at work' which 'will burst out of the men in revolt'[110] but she will not be able to go beyond this instinctive understanding until she is able (or willing) to analyse the nature of those tremendous forces.

It is the story of Jeff and Phyl that is taken up in the next book in the series, *Rising Tide*[111]*.* Although this novel Lindsay deals directly with the London Dock Strike of 1949 into which he plunges Phyl and Jeff as activists, Lindsay is not seeking to stress their militancy or to cast them as working class heroes in the way the Soviet inspired socialist realsis may have done. Rather they are representatives of the ordinary and their circumstances are reflective of the trials and tribulations of everyman. Phyl and Jeff are not moral paragons presented as models to be emulated and their concerns are mundane but pressing ones that would have been recognised by a contemporary reading audience. *Rising Tide* focuses on the couple and their attempts to establish an independent life when the odds are firmly stacked

[109] Betrayed Spring p399
[110] Ibid p348
[111] Jack Lindsay *Rising Tide* (London : Bodley Head, 1953)

against them. The post-war housing shortage forces them to live in emergency war-shelter accommodation, barely fit for human habitation, amongst a community of other working class families struggling to make ends meet. Phyl and Jeff move in as another family moves out – a necessary tactic to prevent the local authority from completely demolishing the accommodation because 'the authorities had got wind of the move and sent a gang along to start pulling the shack down'[112]

In spite of the squalor of what is effectively a squat, the couple find that solidarity only stretches so far and they are forced to fight off attempts by other families to stake a claim on the shed. Lindsay's description of the settlement invites comparison with the descriptions of slum housing found in the work of the French Communist and Socialist Realist, Andre Stil, whose novel *The Watertower* [113]was influential of the British post-war novels within the CPGB. *The Watertower* was part of an unfinished trilogy of Thirties working class life (putatively known as 'The First Clash') that attacked the continuation of slum housing and although there is no independent evidence to verify the fact, it is likely that Stil's work influenced Lindsay's *British Way* project and led ultimately to the fourth book in that sequence, *A Local Habitation.*[114]

Nothing comes easily for the couple and they have to fight for every small comfort they are able to establish. For Phyl this is not the dream of married life she had imagined for herself – 'Oh, Jeff, isn't it awful?'[115] - but it forces her to confront the realities of the compromises forced on the working class. Making ends meet on low wages proves difficult enough but both Jeff and Phyl are soon caught up in a strike which forces both of them to come to a different understanding of themselves and their respective roles. Phyl supports the struggle on the domestic front, keeping the household together

[112] Ibid p57
[113] Andre Stil *The Watertower* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1953)
[114] Jack Lindsay *A Local Habitation* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1955)
[115] *Rising Tide* p59

and supporting Jeff when he becomes drawn into a more active role as a union grassroot platform speaker.

Phyl and Jeff Burrows are presented by Lindsey as representatives of the ordinary, decent working class who understand the value of community and collective action without ever taking that to the level of intellectual engagement. Thier grasp of what is right and fair is essentially intuitive - Phyl at the end of *Rising Tide* acknowledges this instinctive notion of what is right or wrong as the novel reaches its cconclusion:

> '....you'll be surprised how easily things some out right'. She was surprised at her own wisdom. 'That's true you know. They seem hopelessly muddled and wrong, and suddenly you stand up and say you wont have them like that a moment longer, and they start changing. As if you threw a heavy burden off.' [116]

It is clear that Lindsey sees the character of Phyl Burrows as representing a kind of worthy but limited type of working class consciousness – one which responds positively, pragmatically but only incrementally to the lessons that trade union engagement has for her. Things happen to Phyl and she responds to them instinctively and with a sense of what is fair and just but Phyl will clearly never shape her world or be a driver of change. He does, however, provide the reader with a less passive alternative character who, rather than simply responding as Phyl does to a set of social forces she does not understand but instinctively knows is unfair, looks to use her emotional commitment to socialism and her intellectual understanding of that ideology to shape the world around her. This character is Jill Wethers. Where Phyl is uncertain and limited in the way her social conscience grows, Jill is by contrast a force of nature:

[116] Rising Tide op. Cit. p268

> With the handkerchief off her head, she seemed more formidably handsome: her hair springing up and back from her brow in waves and curls, as if a strong wind was blowing it back, as if it were a mane.[117]

The character of Jill Wethers , a shop steward and a fierce debater, not only provides a useful contrast with Phyl Tremaine but also as a running rebuke to the baseless and ill-conceieved Socialism of characters like Kit Swinton who, when tested, default to support for their own class. Swinton, the son of a mill owner, is struggling with his identity and his politics and is being pressed to make a decision about whether to follow his father into the family business. Kit's internal battle is largely about class and class identity; he is, Lindsay seems to be saying, a good example of why the post-war Labour administration was such a disappointment. At one level Kit understands that he belongs in the bourgeoisie – his family loyalty and friendships all tie him to his class - but his experience of the war and the commitment of many of his peers to vague ideas of fairness and justice means he is attracted to a weak and unconvincing kind of socialism the Labour Party offers:

> I've just said I'm a socialist and it's true. But not so much because I like socialism but because I dislike the alternatives even more...But the Labour Party – well the more I look at, the more I see old devils with new fake-haloes round their horns.....That's how I feel. A rather tepid feeling, when you actually take its temperature.[118]

Swinton's 'tepid' level of political engagement not only makes for conflict with his father but also stirs confusion inside himself which becomes problematic when he encounters Jill Wethers. Jill is infused with the passion of trade

[117] Betrayed Spring op. Cit. p150
[118] Betrayed Spring op cit p118

unionism and CP politics and he finds himself both drawn to her and frightened by her powerful beliefs. She is decisive and committed when he is vacillating and uncertain and he is tempted to equate his fascination with her for love. It is commitment to shop-floor trade unionism and political awareness that gives Jill the ideological assuredness that constantly challenges Kit. Her ability to engage in practical trade union action at the shop floor level *and* debate political theory gives her a confidence, directness and sense of power – something Phyl Tremaine will never achieve at the level of intuition.

The weakness of Swinton's political commitment makes his eventual decision to be true to his class calling seem inevitable. His flirtation with socialism, only ever superficial, is shown by Lindsay to be inconsequential when confronted by the ruthless power of capital represented by Kit's father. He symbolically accepts the reality of his class when he acquiesces to the blacklisting of 'troublemakers' and 'militants'.[119]This, Lindsay seems to be saying, is what happens when false class consciousness is mistaken for ideology or belief – it cannot withstand challenge and will always revert to its true nature. However much Kit frets over unfairness and inequality he comes from the class that creates those very conditions and however much personal regret and suffering it causes him, ultimately he will accommodate those values, mentally and physically metamorphosing into the capitalist he was destined to become:

> And as he bent there, weakly retching, he felt relieved, savagely and bitterly relieved. As if he were vomiting up his whole past. All his weaknesses. From now on I know what I want and how to get it.[120]

The ritual of this encounter and the personal purging that follows it leaves us in very little doubt that Kit's future loyalties will lie with the interests of the

[119] Ibid p383
[120] Ibid pp383-384

capitalist class and the title of the third novel in the series, *A Moment of Choice,*[121] seems to underscore the idea that a threshold has been passed and this decisive moment for Kit will also have to be faced by others as the story unfolds. Jill's relationship with Kit forces her in turn to consider the consequences of her own choices and to face some of the contradictions of her own beliefs and doubts. Her shop-floor militancy not only meets with stubborn opposition from employers but also has to deal with the apathy of her working colleagues who consistently fail to see the bigger picture. Her vocation as a trade unionist is a constant uphill struggle and her efforts are met with a 'blank lack of interest'.[122] She is forced to ask herself the key question that Lindsey as a Communist understood lies at the heart of trade unionism and trade union representation – how can the working class ever be convinced that they must stand up to their oppressors if they are ever to progress?

> She felt abashed before a woman who was ready to sacrifice herself so uncomplainingly for her family; such a woman was the salt of the working class; and yet how cruelly futile was her self-dedication when it only helped to perpetuate the martyring system. If I can't win her over, what use am I? She thought, and decided to get to know her.[123]

In novels like *A Miner's Son* and *Stewartie* this level of self-doubt and uncertainty about the ability of the committed trade unionist and Socialist to convince their comrades and colleagues of the virtues of the class struggle would have been unthinkable. The uncertainty Wethers feels about the efficacy of her struggle introduces a degree of sophistication of argument and interpretation not found in propagandist novels of socialist realism but reflects the real anxieties of representatives who always fear they cannot assume they will always be able to win the arguments with their members.

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[121] Jack Lindsay *The Moment of Choice* (London: Bodley Head, 1955)
[122] Ibid p77
[123] Moment of Choice p223

Both Jill Wethers and Phyl Tremaine's husband, Jeff Burrows, in their very different ways represent for Lindsay the sort of trade unionists who are on a journey towards the level of enlightenment needed to forge a true and potentially revolutionary socialism. For Jill, her beliefs are underpinned by the praxis of theory and experience – 'Never look down on people because they're bogged in the vile world that surrounds them. We all learn the hard way.'[124]Lindsey also has Wethers warn about the dangers of the 'phony propoganda'[125]used by capitalists to confuse the working class but it can also be taken as Jill's developing perspective on the way in which the CPGB was conducting its business and the equally damaging 'phony propaganda' it too was engaged in. For Jill, and I would argue for Lindsey too, the key issue is to acknowledge the basic decency and humanity of ordinary people and this should take us beyond crude oppositionalist ideology. Controversially, Lindsey is suggesting that capitalists themselves are capable of being fair and decent people but are in their own terms victims of capitalism and its dehumanising influence:

> The people are warm-hearted and really ready in many ways to take up the struggle as soon as the need for it appears [….] this question of faith in people lies at the heart of all problems. How easy it would be to say that Kit is too entangled in the capitalist machine and all its corruptions; and how wrong. It's the capitalist machine itself that makes one think like that.[126]

Lindsey takes Wethers on a journey of understanding as a CP member that moves her away from the directly confrontational, pre-war 'class versus class' analysis which had shaped Party policy until 1950 and puts her in a position where she is able to embrace the broad coalition of 'progressive' interests envisaged by the CPGB as the route to power and influence.

[124] Ibid p306/307
[125] Ibid p306
[126] Ibid p329

For Jeff Burrows the challenge of bringing together the experience of trade unionism and combining that with a level of political theory that allows him to interpret and understand his situation is a more substantial challenge. Moving on from an intuitive oppositionalism – 'As long as a man had something to hit out against, life wasn't so bad'[127]- to something more constructive needs to be supplemented by an ability to 'testify to the truth despite all insult and hardship, testify to the human truth they embodied in their daily work, their resistances to the world of money-values.'[128]

Both Jill Wethers and Jeff Burrows represent a kind of shop-floor, shop-steward level union activism which Lindsey presents as dynamic, grounded and always questioning but at its heart rooted in socialist values. By way of contrast Lindsey shows us another, less appealing type of trade unionism – the trade unionist who has lost sight of the purpose of his role and who has become bureaucratised. The story of Will Emery and his betrayal of true trade union principles is treated with some sympathy - Emery is depicted as a good man whose belief in the trade union movement and his dislike of the rich are real – but he has been seduced by the establishment because he has lost contact with the realities of the class struggle at the shop floor level. The closer he gets to management, the more they reel him into their web of comfort and confidence, the more delusional he becomes. Not only has he become a tool of management he is 'dead scared of having to go back to the bench. You'd lie, sell yourself, do anything to escape it.....'[129]

Lindsey here is making his position clear on an important contemporary debate within the trade union movement about where true and authentic trade unionism can be found. The proper place for the trade unionist is in the workplace alongside his or her comrades – in the way we

[127] A Local Habitation p113
[128] *Rising Tide* p224
[129] *Betrayed Spring* p390

have seen Jeff Burrows and Jill Wethers operate – and not in an office seeking to build a trade union bureaucracy that can parallel the structures of capitalism. Trade unionists who, like Emery, believe they are able operate on the 'inside' are fooling themselves and when Emery declares that he has found ways ' to get all that's possible from the management.....And I'll go on fighting them on their own ground, and winning'[130], we know he has lost his moral compass. Ultimately we know that this is all self-serving bluster and tellingly it is the person closest to Emery, his wife Jean, who is allowed to give us the definitive perspective on her husband and his brand of trade unionism when she tells him, 'You're corrupt. You're corrupt through and through. My God, why didn't I see it before?'[131]

Lindsay's 'novels of the British way' have received remarkably little attention from literary critics and those that have taken note are, it is fair to say, less than fulsome in their praise. Whilst they acknowledge that Lindsay's version of socialist (or critical) realism is a more rounded and complex one than that represented by novelists like Doherty and Bonnar, they still argue that their literary value is fatally compromised by the desire to preach on behalf of a particular ideology. David Smith argues that plot and dialogue suffer because Lindsay feels compelled to keep reminding us of his 'Communist commentary [which] comes at intervals in jargoned conversations, usually carried on by peripheral characters..'[132] Ingrid von Rosenberg is even more blunt:

> In spite of Lindsay's efforts to insert authentic working class speech, the novels fail to come to life because the characters are made to move in rather a too stereotyped pattern and the political preaching gets too shrill at times.[133]

[130] Ibid p391
[131] Ibid p391
[132] David Smith op cit p141
[133] Ingrid von Rosenberg op cit p150

It is certainly the case that Lindsay frequently runs the risk of being overly didactic in the four books that have been examined in this study. The need to push home the political implications of aspects of the plot leads to set-piece expositions that take the pace out of the plot-lines and force characters to talk in ways that are not always convincing. However, unlike the Zhadovian-inspired novels of socialist realism, his characters, whether CP members or not, are for the most part three-dimensional and have significant complexity – mixing good with bad and weakness with strength. The action of the novels does not ignore the reality of the outside world in terms of historical events and he is also aware that new ideas about the relationship between politics and personal identity need to be reflected in the way his characters develop. This is demonstrated most clearly in the arena of sexual politics where Lindsay clearly tries to get to grips with the changing role of women in the workplace and the home. He draws a parallel of sorts between the politics of the shop floor and the domestic politics of the home and in the sexual and emotional relationships the characters develop. It can be argued that across the four books it is frequently the women characters that take more interesting and progressive views about the relationship between the public sphere represented by the workplace and the private, domestic environment and that by doing this they anticipate many of the more detailed theoretical and ideological debates around feminism that would emerge by the end of the 1960s.

Lindsay provides us with a multi-dimensional portrait of British life in the post-war years as seen from a radical perspective, highlighting ideas and actions that were not being systematically written about in fiction elsewhere. This provides an interesting and valuable counterpoint to many similar novel sequences written from the viewpoint of the middle-class establishment by authors such as Anthony Powell and C.P.Snow and gives the reader access to

the voices of the 'ordinary working man' written by someone who knew them and lived and worked alongside them.

It is also important to note that Lindsay's world view was not, as previous socialist realism tended to be, remorselessly optimistic about the future of the working class or the inevitability of revolution. Just as the character Jill Wethers in *Moment of Choice* had felt a kind of despair about whether the working class will ever shake off their bondage to their middle class 'betters', so Lindsay seems to be saying that if the revolution is to come at all it will come slowly and that a substantial part of the reason for this slow progress is the capacity of humanity for betrayal and lies. It has already been noted that a central theme of the novel is the betrayal of the working class by the incoming Labour administration in 1945 and their timidity, as perceived by those on the Left, in terms of the reforming agenda. But this idea of betrayal goes well beyond this core conceit and becomes, in fact, a leitmotif running through the books' key episodes. Will Emery betrays himself, the trade union movement and, ultimately his wife, not simply by becoming corrupt but by also having an extra-marital affair; Jeff Burrows and the dock workers are betrayed by the Labour Government who use the army to break their strike; Kit Swinton betrays his idealism and then betrays Jill Wethers by colluding in her sacking; even Jeff Burrows betrays his wife Phyl by succumbing to a pointless and slightly grubby extra-marital fling. It is as if the very fabric of the social and political environment is characterised by acts of deception and, Lindsay seems to be suggesting, this lack of moral centre is inevitable under capitalism.

This is a very much more complex world than that which can be found in the novels of socialist realism discussed earlier. Andy Croft reports Lindsay's antipathy to what he saw as the 'mechanical and trivialising'[134]tendencies of that strand of literature and the first four books of the British Way series demonstrate that he wanted a different kind of realism

[134] Andy Croft *The end of social realism* p201

that would speak directly to the experiences of the working man and still express the complexity and contradiction of political life in a time of change and uncertainty.

The end of socialist realism?

By the end of the 1950s and moving into the new decade of the 60s, the political landscape for the CPGB was changing dramatically. Membership was on a sharply declining trajectory and the realities of Soviet foreign policy which had been crudely expressed through the repression of Hungary had driven away a swathe of artists and writers who found themselves uncomfortably associated with what was clearly a totalitarian regime. Willingness to look to Soviet Russia to provide a literary theory that would steer the output of novelists was also falling from favour. Lawrence and Wishart's decision to withdraw from fiction publishing and focus instead on it's non-fiction list was partly a response to the poor sales generated by socialist realism but also an acknowledgement that those formulaic novels no longer had anything useful to say about a post-war, post-welfate state Britain in which the trade unions had traded in their revolutionary aspirations for a seat at the table of government.

Andy Croft has argued, with some justification, that Margot Heinemann's novel, *The Adventurers,*[135] published in 1960 but set in the period between1943 and 1956, effectively marks the end of socialist realism as a viable way for the CP to present itself to the world. He claims that:

> *The Adventurers* sought to portray the world as it was and the party as Heinemann saw that it needed to be – abashed, modest and

[135] Margot Heinemann *The Adventurers* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1960)

> genuinely self-critical – if it was ever to recover from the shock of 1956 and the loss of its claim to the absolute truth.[136].

There is, of course, a substantial irony in the idea that Heinemann's work should mark such an important moment in the CP's relationship with fiction given that she had been, as the editor of *Daylight,* one of the key proponents of the need for a Zhdanov-style of socialist realism. Her abandonment of this in favour of something that looks more like Lukács description of critical realism can be seen as her response to the trauma and re-evaluation many intellectuals in the party were experiencing in the wake of the mass exodus of members triggered by the invasion and repression of Hungary in 1956.

The Adventurers [137] was Margot Heinemann's first and only published work of fiction and tracks the critical developmental paths of the two organisations that had been at the heart of Heinemann's public, educational and literary life: the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Trade Union movement. Heinemann's membership of the CPGB is described by Andy Croft as the defining aspect of her career as a creative writer :

> And while other writers and intellectuals began to group around the dissenting positions from which they left the Party in 1956, Heinemann was increasingly identified with the hardening cultural orthodoxies of King Street[138].

Her previous non-fiction output had developed on from her role as an economist and propagandist in the Labour Research Department [LRD] - which had been characterised by the production of pamphlets and booklets on the state of British workers health, wages and the potential impact of nationalisation on the coal industry. It was, therefore, not surprising given the

[136] Andy Croft op cit p212
[137] Margot Heinemann *The Adventurers* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1960)
[138] Andy Croft op cit p197

radical profile she had developed that she was asked to take up the role of editor for the CP's cultural magazine, *Daylight,* which had set itself the goal of 'purging' of what it claimed was decadent, self-indulgent or modernist writing in favour of a rigidly interpreted, Soviet-inspired, socialist realism.

1943 and 1944 turned out to be the key years of success and influence for the CPGB and in 1945 it broadly supported the lobby for a continuation of wartime Coalition government which Thompson[139] suggests it was keen to join. The CPGB also came close to formally affiliating to the Labour Party during the last years of World War Two and its influence on the rapidly evolving, politically aspirant trade union movement was also at its peak. However, for the CPGB, this was as good as it ever got. In the following ten years the Party failed to develop a credible and supportable response to the steady flow of damaging revelations about the repressive regime of Stalin and his inflexible Soviet domestic and foreign policy. By 1956 the increasingly dictatorial approach to political, cultural and literary self-expression within the Party had resulted in swathes of resignations and culminated in 1956 with wholesale defections following the crushing of the uprising in Hungary. Thompson[140] describes this as a 'polarising' moment where 'the stream [of resignations] was expanding into a flood, among them some of the Party's most eminent trade union luminaries.'

For the trade union movement, which had been Heinemann's other key pillar of the revolutionary labour movement, the trajectory was quite different. The close links between the trade unions and the Labour Party were being further cemented at the national political level despite the often vigorous efforts of CP members or sympathisers working at local and branch levels. The future for this part of the labour movement was being interpreted by those organising and running the individual unions as not simply an industrial one but a political one. But this would not be the politics of

[139] Willie Thompson Op Cit . p73
[140] Ibid p104

revolution and worker power but that of partnership, management and bureaucracy – with confrontation kept as the ultimate lever for political change.[141] 1943 – 1956 may have seen the rapid rise and fall of the CPGB as a serious political player in the country but it marked a period of transformation and influence for the trade unions that would peak in the Sixties and Seventies.

As a result, *The Adventurers* is a novel that reflects the changing political landscape Heinemann was witnessing. From the outset the book presents us with conflict between the old and new; the tightly knit working class community of Abergoch, a town in transition where the old ways are being challenged by a younger generation no longer tied by the loyalties of class and history - "A change is what we need, too damn settled in this old rut. I'm not so keen on walking just the same old streets my granddad walked[…]"[142]

It is not just the town and its main industry that is changing; so are the aspirations of its residents. Miners – such as Tommy Rhys Evans - who are committed to staying in their traditional jobs and see nationalisation of the pits as a way to obtain enhanced terms and conditions and a say in the way the industry is run, remain attached to concepts of community and solidarity. Others, like Dan Owen, want nothing to do with the pit at all and seek a way out into a wider world and they are enabled to do so through the TUC's sponsorship of a programme of worker-centred education made available through through workplace and in college-centred higher education institutions.[143]

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[141] Ken Coates *The Vagaries of Participation* in Ben Pimlott and Chris Cook *Trade Unions in British Politics* (London: Longman, 1982) pp171-188

[142] *The Adventurers* p202

[143] For a discussion of trade union-led education see A.J.Cornford *Epoch in Workers' Education* (London : WEA, 1969) pp85-104

Dan and Tommy's very different ideas about what the future should be like are not just an expression of different temperaments within the individual characters but are, for Heinemann, representative of a clash of values within the working class that will ultimately result in direct conflict and ultimate schism. When Dan and Tommy come to blows[144] it is clearly a fundamental struggle between two different sets of values that splits these life-long friends apart. Tommy, a miner, an active union member and representative of the community solidarity of the working class, finds himself unable to deal with the complexity of the world outside Abergoch which, at every level, disappoints him. He feels betrayed by Dan because he sees him as having abandoned his working class roots and values and also by his union leaders who he sees as corrupted by their proximity to power which is described by Tommy as a 'kind of disease'.[145]Ultimately he draws strength and certainty for the future by returning to his roots and eschewing his brief flirtation with national politics and rejecting the possibility of a post in the union hierarchy:

> "I don't want it," Tommy said. "I can fight best among the lads in the pit. I know them and they know me."[146]

Although not a Communist himself, Tommy shares many of the characteristics of the Party trade unionists depicted in the novels of Doherty or Bonnar. He is committed to the working class struggle, loyal to his workmates and sceptical of a union bureaucracy that is as likely to succumb to the blandishments of power as any capitalist. Tommy's desire to stay close to the coal-face and to represent his union colleagues at a local, shop steward, level echoes those qualities found in characters such as Bert Stewart or Will Mellers.

Dan's story, however, is very different. The action of the novel opens in1943 with the 18 year old facing imprisonment for refusing to become a 'Bevin Boy' and take his place down the pit as part of the war effort.

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[144] *The Adventurers* pp280-281
[145] *The Adventurers* p275
[146] Ibid p319

Ironically, given the way Dan's career develops, it is the unofficial strike action threatened by Tommy and his workmates that raises the profile of the case and allows the Regional Official, Lewis Connor, a local hero to the men, to get involved. Unlike many of the Regional Officers encountered in the other novels of socialist realism, Connor is depicted positively as both a cunning negotiator and a popular local man still grounded in the issues of the men:

[…] this was more like it – here where he knew everyone[..]Here the colliers going home would stop him in the street to remind him of an old acquaintance or a promise[…]It reassured him that he was still the same.[147]

Connor is more than a mere populist however. He is aware that he not only has loyalties to the miners at the local level, he also has responsibilities in relation to his trade union at a national level. He recognises that coal needs to be dug as an essential part of the war effort and that conscription to the mines is not opposed by the union at the national level. His recognition that his role is to find a way of meeting the demands of local members and his wider strategic responsibilities within the union is what give him his status.

Connor's solution to the problem of Dan's imprisonment is to create a special case without creating a precedent – getting Dan released because of his claustrophobia. This intervention will later become the issue that precipitates the falling out of Dan and Tommy but initially at least it facilitates Dan's progress out of the mining community and enables him to pursue his dream of becoming a radical journalist. He attends a union sponsored college in Cambridge called 'Keir Hardie'[148] [clearly modelled on institutions such as Ruskin College or Northern College] where he mixes with a range of fellow students with a diverse set of socialist and progressive ideas. Despite initially feeling out of his depth and still fiercely loyal to the mining community he came out of, Dan is evidently gradually moving into another world.

[147] Ibid p16
[148] Ibid p56

Dan's storyline, and the contrast between his development and the path taken by Tommy, allows Heinemann to address a key issue. The trade union movement's commitment to workers education was a significant feature of this phase of its development and whilst it was presented as an important way of developing the next generation of union leaders and working class political thinkers, it also contributed to fears over the 'embourgeoisement' of individuals and the resulting loss this might represent for the labour movement[149]. Put in simple terms, 'embourgeoisement' represented the loss of class identity – as workers were introduced to an increasingly affluent and well educated life-style they would adopt the characteristic of the middle classes and reject their working class heritage. This, of course represented a dilemma for the trade union movement; at one level the development of the individual was a key goal but the dangers of individuals coming to identify too closely with the values of middle class managers was clearly a threat. The full-time trade union official who had become an agent of the capitalist system had become, for the Left, as significant a boogieman as the heartless employer or self-serving industrialist and both Bonnar's *Stewartie* and Lindsay's *Betrayed Spring* had offered damning portraits of the trade union official as capitalist lackey.

Dan's gradual identification with a middle-class ethos which is hostile to both the working class and its organisations is eventually completed following his eventual confrontation with Tommy over the betrayal of Lewis Connor:

> He had never, in all of this, sought to make a new and general judgement on the world. There was no moment he could look back on and say: at this point I changed my views. It was rather that, after

[149] For a detailed discussion of embourgeoisement as a political and sociological construct see John H. Goldthorpe et al. *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge: CUP, 1969) pp 1-30

> some years of experience, the views seemed to have changed on him[…] A bond was now broken.[150]

Heinemann's treatment of Dan's story demonstrates a clear concern over this issue which had become a conundrum with no easy solution. The trade union and Labour Movement must stand for educational opportunity but in doing so run the risk of producing very dangerous opponents – individuals that are 'of' your world and understand its drivers but who side, in class terms, with the opposition.

Croft notes that had Dan's story been allowed to take centre stage without challenge *The Adventurers* 'might perhaps be better known, a study in "success" and social mobility' [151] but this was clearly not what Heinemann intended. She was concerned that Dan's story did not present embourgeoisement as an inevitable process. Croft refers to Heinemann's unpublished letter to Arnold Kettle in which she says 'I particularly didn't want to treat it as inevitable that Dan, in a good job, would simply start to sell his mates for money…the line I want to draw here is between the Dans and the rest.'[152]

The second half of the novel turns its focus away from Dan's world of journalism and back to Abergoch and there is more of a spotlight on the pit's future and the lives tied-up with that. The characters of Tommy and Lewis Connor who had featured as important elements in the story of Dan Owen's personal journey, move more to centre stage and are joined by the Communist organiser and one-time Keir Hardie student, Richard Adams, who helps to organise the campaign to prevent the closure of the Abergoch pits. The nature of trade unionism and the complexities of committing to being an

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[150] *The Adventurers* p288
[151] Andy Croft *The End of Socialist Realism* p206
[152] Ibid pp206-207

active trade unionist are explored through these three narrative strands which are all connected and given some coherence by the links with Dan Owen.

Lewis Connor, shown at the beginning of the novel as a self-confident, shrewd and popular regional union official works hard to end a series of unofficial strikes at the Abergoch pits because he believes that their growing reputation for militancy will lead management to close them down. He manages to negotiate a return to work and get the threat of closure lifted only for the deal to collapse when the men mount another wildcat strike. Ultimately it is his action in leaking the Coal Boards original plan to close the pits that wins them a final reprieve but by this point Connor is deeply concerned that he is becoming nothing more than a 'lion-tamer'[153] constantly expected to bring the men into line. The fact is that the nationalisation of the pits he so wanted has turned him from being a popular leader into a fire-fighter – someone there to mediate and to deal with rogue troubles. In Connor's story Heinemann is turning her attention to the issue of 'bureaucratisation' and the way in which the trade union activist can be neutralised by incorporation. Richard Hyman offers differing versions of the way in which this process works – from Lenin's view that it is an inevitable function of trade unionism within a capitalist system to that of Trotsky who saw it as a deliberate ploy of capitalism to offer activists responsibility and thereby disarm them. [154] However, Heinemann's position on this seems closer to that expressed by the U.S. sociologist C. Wright Mills [1948] who said:

> Business-labor co-operation within the place of work...means the partial integration of company and union bureaucracies.... The union takes over much of the company's personnel work, becoming the disciplining agent for the rank and file... Company and

[153] Ibid p197

[154] Richard Hyman *Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unionism* (London: Pluto Press, 1971) pp

> union...are disciplining agents for each other, and both discipline the malcontented elements among the unionized employees. [155]

Despite his reservations Connor does, however, decide to stand for election to a national union post and mounts a vigorous election campaign strongly supported by the rank and file members – especially those in Abergoch. However, he is defeated because of the manoeuvrings of an anti-communist caucus within the TUC who use Dan Owen to research Connor's past connections with the Communist Party and present that relationship negatively. Reflecting on this, Connor, is a broken man:

> […]it was a blow to all the things by which, though not too desperately in late years, he had lived.[..] But all that had seemed best and most honourable in the pattern of his work – his loyalty to the men underground, his witness to the brotherhood of man – all this had been cheapened and degraded, and rejected among his own people.[156]

Connor's disillusionment is also shared by Tommy who not only discovers and exposes Dan's role in Connor's humiliation but also has his own difficult experience of disappointment when he goes to the 1954 TUC conference having recently been elected chair of the combined Abergoch union lodges. Tommy's great hope is to find at the TUC 'the sense of man's brotherhood'[157] but instead finds the Congress is split over the question of German re-armament. As Andy Croft astutely observes 'Tommy learns that that every fine vision frays on the hard edge of experience.' [158]

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[155] C.Wright Mills *The New Men of Power* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001 edition) p224
[156] *The Adventurers* p262
[157] Ibid p268
[158] Andy Croft *The End of Socialist realism* p209

The overarching theme of disappointment and hopes dashed also envelopes the work of Richard Adams and his wife Kate who move to Abergoch to start a branch of the CPGB. They throw themselves wholeheartedly into the campaign to save the pits and, when the reprieve is forthcoming, they are elated by their success. Wrongly, they interpret their popularity in the campaign as popularity for the Communist Party and when they seek to extend their activities, they fail to carry the locals with them. Lewis Connor's defeat deepens the sense of foreboding and gloom they had developed over the increasingly bitter internal squabbles within the Communist Party in Moscow. The situation in Hungary seems to be the final straw:

> And then came Hungary [……]The shock was not just the violence and bloodshed itself. It was that the workers in factories and mines had not risen united to defend a Socialist Government, had not, it seemed, thought it worth defending. It seemed to Richard now that all the people who had refused to listen were quite right.[159]

All of the characters end the novel in various states of disappointment or despair. Heinemann demonstrates the way in which the growing influence of the media would become the defining context in which the battles between the Labour Movement and the representatives of commerce and industry would be played out. The experience of Dan would come to stand as symbolic of the way in which the owners and controllers of various media outlets would exploit the aspirations of individuals to create division within the trade union movement. In turn the unions, in seeking to become key players in the national political debate, would continue the drift towards bureaucratisation and all of the tensions that this would reveal. For those members of the CPGB there would be no recovery from the haemorrhage of membership experienced in 1956.

[159] *The Adventurers* p303

Heinemann calls her novel *The Adventurers* and for the first half of the book it seems to be an adventure worth taking part in. By the end the adventure has either changed its course or, for some, it has abruptly ended. For the CP the adventure is over whilst for the British Trade Union Movement it is only just beginning – but it will be an adventure that has within it the seeds of its own downfall.

Conclusion

In the novels considered in this chapter membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain and membership of a trade union is presented as a symbiotic relationship. Building strong worker representation at a workplace level was, for the CP, the necessary first step towards a larger mobilisation of a working class that would be sympathetic to the Party's ambition to be part of a progressive coalition of Left-wing interests that could present itself to the electorate as a viable alternative government. Disseminating those key messages through fiction, providing the ordinary working man with a way of encountering those debates in a form that entertained and, to some extent, thrilled them, was a deliberate but only partially successful strategy.

The dispute within the CP over the form these novels took was ultimately damaging to the messages that the books were able to carry to their readership. The CPGB's decision to insist on an adherence to a form of Socialist Realism crafted in Moscow (and designed to meet the needs of a very different readership) resulted in a series of novels which were essentially inward looking – they placed their emphasis on the locality, the particular workplace, the tribulations of the everyday working experience and the personal, moral and ethical impact of Communism on the individual. Andy Croft notes that:

> For ten years, starting at the 'wrong end', the Party had expected its novelists to portray the world as it wanted it to be.[160]

However, for those novelists who were not convinced by Zhdanov's approach, the challenge of portraying in fiction a politically conscious and progressive trade union movement was one that required any action to be viewed in the context of the wider, external environment where the historical realities are acknowledged and problems confronted. Workplace militancy and strong communities remain important but their value can only be assessed in the context of the larger historical framework.

There is a shared and consistent view across all of these novels that trade unionism is an essentially positive force. However, there is also a recognition that not all trade union activity is equally desirable or constructive. All of the books under consideration here make a claim for local or shop steward level trade unionism as the most valuable and vital form of activism. Staying close to and identifying with the membership at a workplace level is seen as having integrity and adhering most closely to the founding principles of unionism. Those members who seek preferment and election to regional or national office are seen as, willingly or not, endorsing the bureaucratisation of the union – a path that will lead to collaboration and betrayal. It is, the novels suggest, to some degree inevitable that full-time union officials who are shielded from the realities of every day working life will develop an alternative agenda that favours their own accretion of power rather than the best interests of their members. In addition, individual members may use the union and its collective strength to further their own personal aspirations for what they see as a better life with different, middle-class, values that may become hostile to the underlying ethos of the labour movement.

The problems created for the union movement by the process of embourgeoisement has been a significant feature of the debate around the

[160] Andy Croft *The end of Socialist Realism* p212

direction that trade unionism has taken since the 1960s. It is easy to see the dilemma it represents because whilst unions have it in their mission to enhance the educational, social and economic circumstances of its members, in doing so it runs the risk that individuals will lose their sense of class consciousness. Margot Heinemann's novel represents one of the first attempt to address these issues in fiction and the next chapter of this study will pick up this theme of trade unions as enablers of social mobility and explore how this debate has been developed.