

# Media, Culture & Society

<http://mcs.sagepub.com>

---

## **The Communist press in Britain, 1920-24**

J. Ure Smith

*Media Culture Society* 1985; 7; 169

DOI: 10.1177/016344385007002004

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mcs.sagepub.com>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Media, Culture & Society* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations** <http://mcs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/7/2/169>

# The Communist press in Britain, 1920–24

J. Ure Smith

## Introduction

‘The emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class itself,’ Marx wrote. This short sentence encapsulates what is perhaps the most fundamental tenet of Marxism. Yet in the twenty or so years following Marx’ death the socialist parties of the Second International — while calling themselves Marxist — moved significantly away from such a conception of workers’ power. Independent workers’ action became secondary to the machinations of parliament and the notion of revolution was diluted into the politics of reform.

This was the picture in Germany, Italy and France. But in Russia, the Bolshevik Party, founded in the early years of the century, set about re-establishing Marxism on a revolutionary footing. Along with a new style of politics and party, the Bolsheviks also succeeded in establishing a type of revolutionary journalism that was unlike anything that had gone before it.

Revolutionary newspapers, of course, were nothing new; their history extends to the early nineteenth century and beyond. In Britain, papers such as *Black Dwarf*, *Red Republican* and later the Chartist *Northern Star* emerged with the Industrial Revolution: they served as the mouthpiece of militant sections of the working class. These papers followed the vicissitudes of the class struggle.

After 1850, for example, the radical press almost disappeared completely with the collapse of the Chartist movement.

---

*Media, Culture and Society* (SAGE, London, Beverly Hills and New Delhi), Vol. 7 (1985), 169–86

Revolutionary journalism was kept alive by *The People's Paper*, launched by Ernest Jones and *The Beehive*, which became the semi-official mouthpiece of the First International.

Some years later, the burgeoning socialist movement spawned a proliferation of both national and local newspapers. The Independent Labour Party produced some seventy papers in the twenty years prior to the first world war. In Germany, the massive Social Democratic Party launched more than 100, with a total daily circulation of 1.5 million.

But these papers — following the tendency of the Second International towards reformism and parliamentarism — became remote from the daily struggle of working people. They were essentially abstract, preaching politics from afar.

The Bolshevik Party broke free of this reformist trend. Lenin set up the paper *Iskra* while in exile in various parts of Europe. The paper was written and produced abroad, then smuggled into Russia via a chain of agents. These *Iskra* agents slowly built around themselves small groups of people who were to become the core of the Bolshevik Party. In this way the party paper became the cornerstone of the Bolshevik tradition.

Through the pages of *Iskra*, Lenin argued with those who said that a revolutionary party should first be built; only then could its members begin thinking about luxuries like a revolutionary paper. Lenin argued that, far from being a luxury, the paper could provide the core of the organization. The party itself would be built around the paper.

Working against the odds to build a revolutionary party in Russia under the repressive Tsarist regime, Lenin argued that a party paper was crucial to the process of linking isolated revolutionaries together as a solid chain of cadre:

The whole art of politics lies in finding and gripping as strong as we can the link that is least likely to be torn out of our hands . . . the one that guarantees the possessor of a link the possession of the whole chain. If we had a staff of experienced bricklayers, who had learned to work together so well that they could place their bricks exactly where they were required without a guiding line . . . then perhaps we might seize upon some other link. But, . . . we have no experienced bricklayers trained in teamwork yet, . . . bricks are often laid where they are not needed, . . . are not laid according to the general line, but are so scattered about that the enemy can shatter the structure as if it was not made of bricks but of sand (Lenin, 1975: 201–202).

The paper, according to Lenin, should play an agitational role, but even more important, it should act as an *organizer*, linking revolutionaries together. Continuing with the building metaphor, he wrote:

A newspaper is not only a collective propagandist and collective agitator, but also a collective organiser. In this respect it can be compared to the scaffolding erected around a building in construction; it marks the contours of the structure and facilitates communication between the builders, permitting them to distribute the work and to view the common results achieved by their organized labour (Lenin, 1975: 202).

In exactly this way the Bolsheviks used first *Iskra*, and later *Pravda*, to assist in building the revolutionary party. By October 1917 that party was capable of leading a successful workers' revolution.

During the period of militancy that shook Europe in the wake of the Russian revolution and the end of the first world war, other communist parties were formed. Though Bolshevik in name, these parties were slow to develop party newspapers in the Russian mould. This article will examine the efforts in this direction of the Communist Party of Great Britain during the 1920s.

### **A new paper for a new party**

The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) was founded after long months of negotiation in autumn 1920. The new party took over *The Call*, the weekly paper of one of its predecessors, the British Socialist Party (BSP), renaming it *The Communist*. The founders of the CPGB were revolutionaries who had seen the need to break with the traditions of the Second International, but it took them some years to establish a party and a paper in the Bolshevik mould.

The first few months of *The Communist* showed evidence that the party leadership recognised that a new kind of journalism was required — that a communist newspaper must be in touch with the day-to-day reality of the class struggle. An industrial column was introduced, mostly edited by Tom Bell, who had been a prominent member of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). When the column first appeared, Bell wrote beneath a heading 'This concerns you', the following:

From last week's *Communist* ... a hint may be taken as to the policy the Communist Party intends to pursue on matters involving industrial struggle by the working class. The policy of theoretical criticism of what would or should not have been done after the event — a characteristic of the old socialist weeklies — will find no place in these columns. ... We shall seek to anticipate events and direct the immediate policy of *The Communist* towards such events consistent with our revolutionary aims. With this object in mind, we wish all party members and sympathizers to keep us informed of happenings in their trade, industry and union ... You can help us in this direction by sending along information on local disputes no matter how trivial. Never mind your grammar. It is news we want, so that we may keep our fingers on the industrial pulse of the labour movement and thus consolidate our agitation (*The Communist*: 19 August 1920).

Bell's comments indicate that those who worked on *The Communist* in its early months were aware that the paper must become far more deeply rooted in the class struggle than its predecessors — the papers of the socialist movement — had been. They began taking the first steps towards the Bolshevik conception of a party paper.

Within weeks of the formation of the CPGB a significant dispute broke out in the mining industry. The miners' union (MFGB) put forward a dual wage demand; they wanted an increase of 2 shillings a shift and a reduction in the price of household coal by 14s 2d per ton. To a certain extent, *The Communist* followed Bell's stated aim of 'anticipating events'.

Before the strike took place, beneath a banner headline of 'Back up the Miners', the paper argued the miners' case in revolutionary terms. In the issues that followed, prominent articles argued support for the miners. But there was a notable weakness in the coverage as well.

With the strongest section of the British workforce out on strike for three weeks, one might have expected *The Communist* to seize the opportunity to immerse itself more fully in the struggle. Here was a chance to fill the pages of the paper with the reports — either in the form of letters or articles — that Bell had so strenuously argued for in his industrial column only a month or so before. Yet not only did the paper fail to print a single worker's letter, once the strike had begun there was virtually no mention of it at all.

The outcome of the dispute was inconclusive. The miners won a wage increase, but a productivity deal, proposed by the coal owners, was left in the balance to be resolved in the months ahead. It was in no sense a clearcut victory, and many militants in the

coalfields must have looked to *The Communist* to clarify what was happening. But the paper's post mortem simply failed to connect with the real world. It was an abstract harangue, which made no attempt whatsoever to relate to the uncertainty miners must have been experiencing:

To the workers of all industries the call of the Communist Party is clear . . . Widen your demands. Insist no longer on mere advances of wages or shortening of hours. In a revolutionary epoch such demands are puerile. Make this demand in no uncertain voice: Henceforth the land of England [sic] with all its mines and factories and wealth producing instruments shall be owned by the workers . . . and no idler or parasite shall have part or lot therein. Work for the Communist Commonwealth and abolish needless poverty once and for all (*The Communist*: 11 November 1920).

Far from being the 'revolutionary epoch', this inconclusive miners' strike marked the beginning of a period of retreat for the working class, with the employers savagely on the offensive. Unemployment was to reach one million by the end of the year, doubling again by the end of 1921.

In the years that followed, wages were driven down dramatically and trades union organization seriously undermined. It was a difficult period in which to build a revolutionary party and newspaper. But while *The Communist* in its first five months had moved tentatively towards the Bolshevik conception of a workers' newspaper, during 1921 it moved in a very different direction.

From the beginning of the year Francis Meynell, a journalist who had worked on the *Daily Herald*, was installed as editor, with Raymond Postgate as his assistant. In his autobiography, Meynell (1971: 127–28) claims his main interest in the paper lay in the opportunities it afforded for typographical innovation. *The Communist* was 'addressed almost wholly to middle class intellectuals', he says, even though the party and its periphery was thoroughly proletarian throughout the 1920s.

Macintyre (1980: 100) has argued that Meynell and Postgate 'managed the paper as a highbrow socialist magazine', divorcing it completely from the daily struggles of the working class. As a party inquiry was later to describe it, the paper was 'full of miscellaneous articles with a Communist bias' (*Report on Organisation*, 1922: 30).

Articles discussed international capitalism, unemployment or the employers' offensive, but they contained nothing to anchor them to

the events of any particular week. There was an overall air of literariness: short stories, poems, satire and historical pieces appeared on page after page. Cartoons by Westral and Espoir (Will Hope) viciously ridiculed the political and trades union leaders, but much of their force was lost by the lack of agitational back-up in the text of the paper as a whole. In fact, so unagitational was *The Communist* that it virtually ignored events in the coalfields in the run-up to the miners' lockout of April 1921. Two weeks before this dispute, which was clearly very significant in terms of the impact its outcome would have on the balance of class forces, the paper filled ten of its fourteen pages with an account of the Paris Commune of 1871, written by Raymond Postgate.

The miners stayed on strike for several months and suffered a crushing defeat. The date, 15 April 1921, is still remembered today as Black Friday, one of the darkest days in working class history. The leaders of the transport and rail unions — which together with the MFGB made up the Triple Alliance — promised solidarity with the miners' action. Yet just hours before the solidarity strike was due to begin, these union leaders found a loophole by which they could call the action off. The event foreshadowed the sell-out of the General Strike 1926.

*The Communist* belatedly got in on the act and by no means ignored Black Friday. It charted in detail the crimes of the union leaders. Espoir's cartoon of 'The Cripple Alliance', in which the grossly deformed union leaders Thomas, Bevin and Hodges cavort on stage to an audience of coalowners, is one of the most vicious portrayals of its kind of all time. But what was lacking from the paper's coverage were the necessary communist arguments about building alternative leadership based on rank-and-file power. At that stage *The Communist* was totally incapable of a journalism geared to building the party.

To argue, however, that *The Communist* was not yet a paper in the Bolshevik mould, is not to argue that it was unpopular. It had a sizeable readership. Under Meynell's editorship, its circulation grew from around 9,000 to almost 50,000 in just four months. At the end of April 1921 the paper noted: 'The print run of this issue . . . based on actual orders received, amounts to 60,000 copies . . . The average sale for the past five weeks has been 49,000 per week' (*The Communist*, 23 April 1921).

Sales rose for a number of reasons. By mid-1921 the Communist Party had had sufficient time to establish a clear identity for itself.

It was seen as a new party of a different type, not simply a continuation of the British Socialist Party under another name. This must account for some of the new sales of the paper.

Curiously enough, a wholesalers' boycott imposed in February 1921 probably boosted the papers' sales as well. The boycott meant that for the first time the organization as a whole had to take responsibility for selling the paper. Up to that point, newsagents had been seen as a key means of distribution. But with the boycott teams of cyclists were organized to get bundles of papers to the branches. It was then up to the membership to make sure new readers were found and copies of *The Communist* sold. All this was a new experience for the Communist Party, but it was — and still is — a crucial aspect of Bolshevik organization. The activity of selling the paper as a means of building the party is something which to this day distinguishes revolutionary parties built in the Bolshevik model from parties like Labour, built on a reformist model.

Sales of *The Communist* reached 60,000 in June 1921. During the miners' strike some of the cartoons appearing in the paper were put to good agitational use near the pitheads. In a letter to Lenin, Tom Bell describes what happened in Fife:

Demonstrations were held as near the mines as possible and within the hearing of the soldiers. By means of gummed labels with 'Don't Shoot' appeals stuck all over the place, cartoons taken from *The Communist* pasted up on the walls and a free distribution of leaflets among the soldiers, good work was done to undermine the morale of the men who were not too keen on the job (1941: 223).

But 60,000 was the high point of *The Communist's* sales. A period of deep demoralization followed Black Friday and the miners' defeat. The party itself went into rapid decline. In MacFarlane's (1966: 75) words: 'Victimization, chaos, unemployment and disillusion had taken their toll — all but the most loyal members had left the party.'

In the months that followed, the party took stock of its organization. This was not simply on its own initiative. Delegates from the CPGB in June 1921 were present at the Third Congress of the Communist International, a meeting which spent most of its time discussing the details of party organization. A number of theses were drawn up, including one on the party press.

The key message brought home by the British delegates was that the party's survival depended on *re-organization*. Bell recalls:



My report to the central committee on the international congresses and their resolutions, especially the resolution on organisation, pointed to the necessity of breaking away from the old geographical socialist type of branch organisation, and for the institution of group and collective direction; furthermore the necessity of transforming our party organ from the old socialist type of propaganda journal to a new type of paper that would become a party organiser, agitator and newspaper (1941: 245–46).

Bell wrote a series of articles on *The Communist* explaining the new perspective. His article on the party press closely followed the original Comintern thesis on this subject:

The Communist Press must be our best agitator and leading propagator of the proletarian revolution, always giving first place to the interests of the oppressed and fighting workers. That our paper may be so, the valuable experience and activity of our members should be collected and published as a guide for the continued revision and improvement of our Communist working methods (*The Communist*, 8 October 1921).

Bell argued that the paper should be produced by a ‘working community of revolutionary workers’. Every member of the party must be brought into a closer relationship with the paper, and be prepared to ‘make sacrifices for it, both material and financial’. Party members must become not only efficient sellers, working intensively around strikes and their aftermath to build the readership of the paper, selling at every meeting and demonstration, but they must also become active reporters for the paper. In turn, *The Communist* must learn to use the examples of everyday struggle sent in by the membership as a means of conveying its revolutionary message.

In March 1922 a three-person commission was set up to investigate all aspects of party organization and work. Seven months later the commission submitted its report to a special conference held in Battersea. Among other things, the report revealed that the membership had sunk to an all-time low of 2,000 and the circulation of *The Communist* had slipped back to 8,000. In the section dealing with the party press the report stated:

The present situation of the party press and publications has been the subject of very considerable complaint, and the demand for alteration is general. This applies particularly to the main party organ.

The commission is convinced that no partial steps will improve the present situation. The various attempts to patch up the present paper by one experiment or another have only made matters worse. A radical transformation is needed of the

whole editorial policy, direction and methods of production (*Report on Organisation*, 1922: 29).

The report then proceeded to iron out some of the confusion the commission had found as it explored the organization:

... The question is sometimes asked whether *The Communist* should be intended mainly for the party members or for the masses. The question betrays a confusion which is at the root of half the existing difficulties. It assumes a separation of the party from the masses. It assumes a choice between 'serious', but 'heavy' matter, of importance to party members — articles on high politics, etc. — and light material attractive to the masses. Both alternatives are equally irrelevant. There should be no separation of party issues from mass issues. The problems and struggle of the party are simply the problems and struggle of the working class. The party organ is an organ of the party because it is an organ of the working class. Its subject matter is everything that concerns the working class (*Report on Organisation*, 1922: 29–30).

The paper should aim 'not only to agitate, but to organise and train', the commission insisted. To do this effectively, it needed to build up a wide range of worker correspondents in the big industrial centres, leading factories and trade unions. The report gave a useful explanation of what it meant for the paper to be an 'organizer', a term used repeatedly in the accounts of the Communist International's theses on the press, but presumably one which had little meaning for many party members still steeped in the methods of work common to the old socialist groups:

In what sense does the party paper organise? The paper organises by giving a lead. In every item that it prints it is seeking to give guidance and direction. In this way the circle of the paper's readers, who read it and look to it for guidance, who follow its lead in action, e.g. in voting on a strike ballot or taking part in a mass protest, are already halfway to being organised for the party. The paper is organising both the party members and the masses outside. The party members need to learn to look to the paper for their day to day lead on every issue and question... not simply in general terms, but in relation to daily happenings as they come, meetings, strikes, union votes, etc., they will learn from these not only the statement of policy to follow, but also the reasons for it and the correct exposition of it. But in addition to this, the paper reaches the wider circles of the masses who are outside the net of the party's regular organisation; it rallies them around the demands of the party and in this way it organises them for the party (*Report on Organisation*, 1922: 31).

The commission was quite specific about changes it wanted to see made in *The Communist*. News — direct from the 'workers'

battlefront' — should take up the main body of the paper, which should be increased in size to broadsheet format. The news should be presented 'according to its relative importance in the class struggle'; artificial divisions between 'industrial' notes, 'political' notes and so on should be avoided. As well as news, the paper should contain statements of party policy — which should be 'short' and 'definite' — and special features on a wide range of topics: the commission suggested a political diary might be introduced, and articles on art, literature and sport. Announcements from the executive of the Communist International and the party executive should be published. And finally, cartoons, photographs, stories, satire and verse should be included, but, the report added, these should be chosen for 'their direct agitational value'.

With regard to selling the paper, the commission argued that the party should break with its dependence on newsagents. This means of distribution had returned with the lifting of the wholesalers' boycott. The report argued that distribution through newsagents meant a separation of the paper from both the party and the class. It recommended distribution through the party machinery to branches and districts, where every member should take responsibility for selling the paper: the members 'should be continually engaged in the work of personal propaganda and recruitment by their endeavours to sell the paper' (*Report on Organisation*, 1922: 34).

The commission's report was received enthusiastically by the Battersea Congress and adopted 'without dissent or opposition' (*The Communist*, 14 October 1922). Four months later a new paper, the *Workers Weekly*, was launched.

### **Towards a Bolshevik paper: the Workers Weekly**

The *Workers Weekly* was launched in February 1923. It sold for 1 penny and was edited by Palme Dutt, one of the authors of the report on organization. From the beginning, the recommendations of the commission were carried out almost to the letter. The paper's four large pages — later expanded to six and eight — were filled with tightly written items of industrial news, both from around Britain and abroad.

Most important, in its early months the *Workers Weekly* read as if it was a paper well integrated into a party that was coming to

understand its revolutionary tasks and how best to carry them out. The united front tactic, adopted by the Communist International at the end of 1921, was given much prominence by the early issues of the paper in a manner which must have convinced many members of the Labour Party and the ILP to join forces with the Communists against the establishment's offensive. In its second issue, the *Workers Weekly* addressed an open letter to the forces of the left.

New attacks are threatening from every side. Wages are already down to starvation levels, and now comes the attack on hours. The homes of the workers are threatened by the campaign to raise rents, and evictions are frequent. The unemployed are treated with open indifference and subjected to a new gap which leaves men stranded for months. The burdens of high taxation and the payment of debt falls unendurably upon the workers in the form of high prices for the elementary necessities of life and sinking wages and unemployment.

The government is seeking to fix the subjection of the workers by special legislation and drag the workers into the horror of a new war.

Against all these attacks the workers are unprepared. Their attempts at resistance have been disorganised and ineffective. The heroic struggles of the miners and the engineers have been wasted by the lack of a common stand (*Workers Weekly*, 24 February 1923).

The letter then carried a series of straightforward, concrete demands with regard to wages, hours, housing, the cost of living, workshop control and unemployment, around which the forces of the left could unite. It added:

These demands are immediate, everyday demands which the widest masses of the workers can most easily understand and unite upon. The Communist Party fully supports and is prepared to fight for these demands, while at the same time carrying on its agitation for the dictatorship of the proletariat as the only solution to the present situation (*Workers Weekly*, 24 February 1923).

It was a classic example of the united front tactic correctly applied. On the second page the paper carried a short but useful article on the theory behind the tactic. The *Workers Weekly* was beginning to suggest a party leadership confident of its politics and aware of the best ways to train the membership and build the party.

The class struggle was not strongly in evidence during 1923. The working class had suffered a crushing defeat in the major disputes of the two previous years. The miners' dispute of 1921 — as we have seen — and the engineering dispute of the following year had taken their toll. It was a question of picking up the pieces and beginning the fightback anew.

Building workers, boilermakers, farmworkers, seamen and dockers were all involved in disputes during 1923. The *Workers Weekly* covered each dispute in a style far removed from the propagandism of *The Communist*. Agitational front pages shouted the workers' demands in each case and argued for a united fight. A special issue of the paper was printed during the London dockers' strike. The noticeably new quality to the journalism was the honest accounting; the ability to relate realistically to each dispute and its outcome:

The building employers have withdrawn the lockout notices. This is no victory for the men; they have made dangerous concessions and have gained nothing (*Workers Weekly*, 21 April 1923).

The same approach was applied to the docks strike of February 1924. The difference with this strike, however, was that it took place under a Labour government — the *first* Labour government. The paper had campaigned vigorously for a Labour victory, with much emphasis on making the party fight on a working class programme. But if the paper's election coverage sowed any illusions about the parliamentary road to socialism, the docks strike brought it swiftly back to the politics of class struggle. Beneath a main headline of 'Two bob a day! No compromise!', the front page argued the dangers of courts of inquiry and the need for solidarity action. A call went out 'to all workers':

The dockers' strike is a call to every trade unionist in Britain. Since the miners' lockout in 1921 every section of the working class has been attacked and defeated. It seemed as if the offensive on the wages and conditions of the workers would never be stemmed.

The dockers are in the fight and lead the way. The rest of the workers must not let them down (*Workers Weekly*, 22 February 1924).

The strike lasted barely a week before a settlement was reached. *Workers Weekly's* analysis centred on the role of the Labour government:

The short week of the docks strike has shown an ugly picture of what may be the rôle of the Labour government in the near future when the workers are on strike.

It is known that every pressure was used by the government to bring about an acceptance of less than the full terms. . . . The principal weapon of that pressure was the threat of the action the government would be compelled to take, including the use of troops and blacklegs, if the strike continued (*Workers Weekly*, 29 February 1924).

Labour in office for the first time meant that the Communist Party had to rethink the presentation of its arguments. The *Workers Weekly* had to find a way of relating to those who felt that criticism of the Labour Party simply played into the hands of the Conservatives and the ruling class. The paper confronted the problem head-on with an article by J.T. Murphy a week before the docks strike. Criticism was vital, he said:

It is the weapon which must be constantly used to beat the mental policeman of the bosses which reigns in the brainboxes of the leaders of the Labour movement.

... We cannot forget the Chartist and their demonstrations when they had nothing like 192 votes in the House of Commons on their side. Nor can we forget that the miners forced a hostile government into its Sankey Commission; that everything gained by the workers has been commensurate with the power they used.

... No-one expects it to do more than it has the power to do, but a Labour government which fails to rouse the whole working class movement into action for the defeat of capitalism and turns instead to be an instrument for suppression of mass activity, not only asks for defeat at the polls ... but also betrays workers in their struggles to beat the capitalists. Mass activity must be the driving force pushing the Labour government ... (*Workers Weekly*, 15 February 1924).

Learning to relate to the Labour government was essentially just one episode in the continuing saga of the united front. The Communists' aim in those years before the General Strike of 1926 was to unite the left in a generalized fightback against the employers and the establishment, drawing the most militant elements into the party in the process. But party building demanded that a clear party profile was maintained in all united campaigns — and that was often easier said than done.

In general, the *Workers' Weekly* managed to walk the tightrope successfully. The examples quoted above, in which the paper relates sensitively to its audience, whilst making no bones about its own revolutionary stance, are not isolated ones.

It was when the party set about building formal organizations among its periphery — the National Minority Movement and the National Left Wing Movement — that the problems really began. The comrades working within these organizations tended to become cut off from the party centre, building an identity simply as leaders of the two movements rather than as *communists* involved in those organizations. The National Left Wing Movement developed in 1925 around the *Sunday Worker*, a paper which exemplified the party's worst tendencies to liquidationism. At its launch, the paper

proclaimed itself as 'the first labour Sunday paper published in Great Britain'. It added: 'Our columns will be open to everyone, whatever his opinion or creed, who is on the side of workers in the class struggle, and is prepared to stay on that side to the bitter end' (*Sunday Worker*, 15 March 1925).

Virtually all the prominent left wing figures around the Labour Party and the trade unions contributed regularly to the paper. The Communist Party leadership wrote many articles as well. Apart from sports pages and gardening columns, the paper presented the news from a class-conscious point of view and hammered right wing politicians and union leaders. But from looking at the paper, it is impossible to tell that it was actually a Communist Party operation, produced by the party and largely financed by it. The CPGB members who wrote articles were not identified as party members. A prominent party figure like Harry Pollitt was referred to primarily as a leader of the Minority Movement, with only rather accidental references to his CPGB membership. Most crucially, no clear communist voice distinguished itself from the other left voices in the paper. The party, in this case, simply collapsed into the Left Wing. And unlike the *Workers Weekly* — which of course had a less difficult role to play — the *Sunday Worker* never became a building block for the party.

### **The Workers Weekly: 'workers forum'**

Zinoviev, writing in a bulletin issued by the Communist International executive in 1921, described *Pravda* as it had been both before the war and in the months between the February and October 1917 revolutions:

What was the strongpoint of *Pravda* at the time? First and foremost, because it devoted more than half its space to letters from working men and women from the factories, *Pravda* was a special type of Communist newspaper. It performed functions which no other Russian newspaper performed. It differed even in its exterior from all other bourgeois and social democratic newspapers. Half a newspaper written by working men and women, soldiers, sailors, cooks, cab-drivers and shop assistants. . . . These letters better than anything else in the world expressed the growing and seething protest which afterwards burst out into the great revolution. The newspaper became the great teacher of the labouring masses and the workers themselves have largely contributed towards it (Zinoviev, 1921).

The notion that the whole party and its periphery must contribute to the production of the paper — as well as its distribution — was a lesson learned by the CPGB during the process of re-organization.

From the start, the *Workers Weekly* set about explaining to its readers what it was trying to achieve:

We want a paper made by the workers for the workers. Our news is working class news supplied by workers on the spot. It may not be very wonderful news yet, but you can improve that for us by seeing that we get the news that you won't get in other papers (*Workers Weekly*, 17 February 1923).

The second issue of the paper proclaimed that the first had sold out in 24 hours. The target circulation figure was 100,000, the paper said. There was an immediacy about the *Workers Weekly* that had never been evident in *The Communist*:

Do you feel that the workers need a paper of their own? Do you know what workers are saying and doing everywhere? Do you mean to help in ending wage slavery in the workshops and starvation in the Labour Exchange queues? Then read *The Workers Weekly* and sell it to your friends (*Workers Weekly*, 24 February 1923).

The paper introduced a column of workers' letters under the logo 'Workers' Life'. In the first year, 2,500 letters and reports arrived on the editor's desk — and over half of these were published. The party as a whole was clearly beginning to connect with its centre.

The letters column began with just two letters: one was from a miner who tried to argue that his trades council should affiliate to the Red International of Labour Unions; the second described how two boys had been killed and two more injured on a tip outside Newcastle where it was customary for the unemployed to 'seek for any old scraps, rags, bottles or anything which might have the least market value . . . to enable them to eke out their doles'. The tip had collapsed under the boys' weight.

More letters were printed in the weeks that followed and other items were incorporated under the 'Workers' Life' logo. A sports column appeared and various regular features offering advice on readers' problems were printed. The advice ranged from entitlements to relief under the unemployment laws to sometimes quite complicated prescriptions from 'the medical editor'. 'Tired of Peckham' was told:



Your bad leg will never heal until you can give it a reasonable amount of rest; avoid standing about, and keep your feet raised whenever you can during the day; raise the foot of your bed at night. Dress the leg with gauze soaked in hazeline lotion, and take at night one tablet of parathyroid extract (tenth of a grain) and then three times a day the following mixture: calcium lactate, ten grains; calcium hypophosphite, five grains; compound syrup of hypophosphites, one drachm, infusion of gentian to make one ounce (*Workers Weekly*, 31 March 1923).

With unemployment still high and wage levels in many cases below those of 1914, such advice must have provided an invaluable service to people who would otherwise have been unable to afford medical treatment.

Quite often during 1924 and 1925 the 'Workers' Life' logo ran over the whole of the back page. Taken together, the letters build up a picture of the horrifying injustices of working class life:

The pit disaster at Medmastley Colliery in Durham, in which six boys and two men were killed, shows the horrible conditions under which miners have to work. A cage with these eight people in it was coming up when the hook . . . became detached. The cage dropping down the shaft canted over and stuck part of the way down, throwing men to the bottom. The men who signaled the cage away heard things falling down the shaft, they thought they were pieces of dirt. Afterwards they learnt they were human bodies. And miners are told by the premier that nothing can be done till trade revives (*Workers Weekly*, 24 March 1923).

Most of the letters printed simply presented stark pictures like this one of working and living conditions. There was very little debate on the page about, for example, the state of the class struggle or particular tactics adopted by the party.

Through the letters column, however, the voices of ordinary working men and women were heard for the first time in any Communist Party publication in Britain. It was a great breakthrough for the paper. *Workers Weekly*, in printing letters like the following, was clearly not looking over its shoulder for approval in radical bourgeois circles as *The Communist* had been:

I joined the Lincoln regiment in 1897, believing I was doing the right thing . . . and saw active service in South Africa and India. I was invalided from India, being unfit for service having contracted enteric fever, malarial fever, sunstroke and rheumatics. A generous country gave me a pension of sixpence a day for eighteen months. When I exhausted this and made application for renewal, the Chelsea pensioners wrote back and told me 'I had never been in the army'. . . . A land fit for heroes, eh? Not fit for b . . . dogs to live in. 'Up the Reds' says me and the missus and the kids; we are all ready for the day of revolt (*Workers Weekly*, 3 March 1923).

The Workers' Life section was praised extensively by the executive of the Communist International. It was indeed an impressive aspect of a paper which had learned how to connect with the day to day reality of working class struggle.

Much emphasis was placed on selling the paper as well. Individuals such as 'Bill Smith and his lad' were singled out for praise for the number of papers they sold. The percentage sale of a number of branches was published from time to time in the *Workers Weekly*. The comrades were urged on to a bigger percentage sale.

Circulation, along with party membership, did pick up in 1923 and 1924. By the end of the first year it was steady at 50,000. An editorial piece ran:

The future of our paper is now assured. It is assured because it is not the journalistic venture of a publishing house, dependent for its vogue on literary skill or tricks of technique; but it is built broadbased on the working class movement in all its aspects (*Workers Weekly*, 15 February 1924).

Since its foundation, the Communist Party had changed a great deal, and in the process it had learned to produce a Bolshevik newspaper worthy of the name.

## Conclusion

The process of establishing a Bolshevik newspaper in Britain in the 1920s was by no means a swift one. The hangovers of Second International politics and press style lingered on in *The Communist*. In its early days, the paper showed promise — those who worked on it had some understanding that the old style, propagandist newspapers were no longer appropriate to the new tasks of the Communist Party. But during 1921 the paper lost sight of this progress towards a Bolshevik journal. It was a stylish enough paper — and its sales rose quite dramatically — but it had none of the characteristics of a genuine workers' paper.

It was only when the party underwent a full-scale process of re-organization along Bolshevik lines that it was possible to produce a paper that could act as both agitator and organizer for the party in the Leninist sense. This is not surprising, since a workers' paper of this kind cannot function independently from party organization; it depends on the commitment and involvement of the members. With the *Workers Weekly*, the Communist Party began to achieve that

kind of integration. The letters and reports received are evidence that the paper was by that stage central to the party's work; it was the pivot about which the organization turned.

The years 1923 and 1924 stand out as the high point of the paper's achievement. After that, the development of Stalinism pushed the party first to the right, then dramatically to the left into sectarian isolation. By the end of the 1920s the party no longer embodied the revolutionary politics that had brought it into being, and its papers inevitably reflected that shift.

## References

### *Newspapers*

- The Communist*. August 1920–January 1923.  
*The Workers Weekly*, February 1923–December 1926.  
*The Daily Herald*, 1921.

### *Background reading*

- Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (1980). London: Inklings.  
 Lenin, V.I. (1963–66). *Collected Works*, Vols 18 and 33. Moscow: Progress Publishers.  
 Lenin, V.I. (1975) *What is to be Done?* Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.  
 Zinoviev, G. (1921). 'The Character of our Newspapers', in *Bulletin of the Executive of the Communist International*. Moscow.  
*Report on Organisation* (1922). London: Communist Party.

### *Other works*

- Bell, T. (1941). *Pioneering Days*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.  
 Bell, T. (1937). *The British Communist Party*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.  
 Challinor, R. (1977). *Origins of British Bolshevism*. London: Croom Helm.  
 Cliff, T. (1975). *Lenin*. Volume 1. London: Pluto Press.  
 Hinton, J. and R. Hyman (1975) *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party*. London: Pluto Press.  
 Hutt, A. (1937). *The Post War History of the British Working Class*. London: Gollancz.  
 Kendall, W. (1977). *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.  
 Klugman, J. (1968–69). *The History of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, Vols 1 and 2. London: Lawrence and Wishart.  
 MacFarlane, F.J. (1966). *The British Communist Party*. London: Macgibbon and Kee.  
 Macintyre, S. (1980). *A Proletarian Science*. Cambridge: University Press.  
 Meynell, F. (1971). *My Lives*.  
 Woodhouse, M. and B. Pearce (1975). *Essays on the History of British Communism*. London: New Park.