

THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF GREAT BRITAIN, 1920–1945*

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ABSTRACT. *The opening of archives in recent years makes it possible to reassess the membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) before 1945. The revised aggregate figures, while not startling, suggest that revisions to established views of the effects of the General Strike, the shift to the 'new line' and the popular front, are in order. The party's membership was very predominantly male, tended to be young, often included a high proportion of unemployed people, and was heavily working class, with miners especially significant. Geographically, its membership was dominated for most of the period by London, Scotland, Lancashire, and South Wales. There was also a very high turnover of membership for much of the period. The reasons for this turnover, and explanations for the circumstances in which the party was best able to recruit, are discussed. Over time the party's membership did become less unrepresentative of Britain as a whole, enabling it to become an organic, if minor, part of British political life. CPGB membership patterns have similarities with those of other Western Communist parties and its predecessor organizations in Britain, showing how the CPGB reflected features of both international Communism and the British left.*

One of the key criteria which can be applied to test the vitality or otherwise of a modern political party is its level of membership. At the most basic level, high and rising membership figures suggest strength, while low and falling ones can be seen as a sign of weakness. But quantitative evidence is not the whole story: mere numbers tell us something, but they do not tell us a lot. Over the past fifty years, political scientists, sociologists, and, to some extent, historians have tried to delve beneath the aggregate figures to present a picture of the type of people who join or joined political parties, and have analysed members by social class, occupation, gender, age, and so on. Some of this work has become increasingly sophisticated. However, most of it relates to the post-1945 period.¹ Before then, there were few studies of party membership, and the historian of interwar

* I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Svetlana Toropova, Yevgeny Sergeev, Peter Cherkassov, and Kiril Anderson (Director of the Russian Centre, Moscow), and the financial support of the British Academy and the University of Exeter.

¹ See e.g. J. Blondel, *Voters, parties, and leaders: the social fabric of modern British politics* (Harmondsworth, 1963), esp. pp. 88–94; P. Seyd and P. Whiteley, *Labour's grass roots: the politics of party membership* (Oxford, 1992); P. Whiteley, P. Seyd, and J. Richardson, *True blues: the politics of Conservative party membership* (Oxford, 1994); P. Seyd, P. Whiteley, and J. Parry, *Labour and Conservative party members, 1990–1992: social characteristics, political attitudes and activities* (Aldershot, 1996).

parties has been left to look on with envy as his or her post-war counterpart has conducted extensive surveys, interviews, and so on to test various hypotheses. Even the most ingenious historian of interwar politics has been left, to some extent, behind, with few new data emerging to offer the chance of reappraisal.

The opening of new archives, both in Britain and in Moscow, however, now allows us to approach afresh the question of the membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Until relatively recently it was *de rigueur* for any historian of British Communism to bemoan the fact that the party's own records were generally unavailable to researchers other than those approved by the party itself, and – where they expressed any awareness of their existence at all – to bewail the prospect that whatever materials had been sent to the headquarters of the Communist International in Moscow would remain for ever under lock and key. But the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent dissolution of the CPGB ushered in, ironically post-Gorbachev, a new era of Glasnost, and the records of the party became available to researchers. Those records, at the Russian Centre for the Preservation of Contemporary Historical Documents (formerly the archive of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism) in Moscow, and the National Museum of Labour History in Manchester, allow us a much fuller picture of the quantitative and, more especially, the qualitative membership of the Communist party between its formation in 1920 and the end of the Second World War (two years after the abolition of the Communist International) in 1945. In particular, the party conducted frequent censuses of membership, especially in the 1920s, and these, along with other reports produced for internal and Comintern consumption, afford insights which have not previously been available.

It would be incorrect to claim that hitherto we have been totally in the dark on these subjects. Various organs of the Communist press, as well as Communist party congress reports, gave fairly regular bulletins as to the level of party membership during the period. Henry Pelling, L. J. Macfarlane, and Kenneth Newton have produced particularly useful tables of membership figures.² These, as will be seen below, were broadly accurate. Even so, there were some misconceptions. It will be part of the purpose of this article to try to shed light on those areas, and to suggest that the new evidence might lead us towards some new ideas about the way in which the Communist party developed. More significantly, the qualitative side of party membership has remained sketchy. Newton and Stuart Macintyre, in particular, went a long way with little empirical evidence, but on the whole the question of who the Communists were has remained rather impressionistic and largely unproven.³ It will be the purpose of the greater part of this article to employ the newly available

² H. Pelling, *The British Communist party: a historical profile* (London, 1958), p. 192; L. J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist party: its origins and development until 1929* (London, 1966), p. 302; K. Newton, *The sociology of British Communism* (London, 1969), pp. 159–60; W. Thompson, *The good old cause: British Communism, 1920–1991* (London, 1992), p. 218.

³ Newton, *Sociology of British Communism*; S. Macintyre, *A proletarian science: Marxism in Britain, 1917–1933* (Cambridge, 1980).

materials to give a much stronger empirical base to conclusions on this issue than has hitherto been possible.

Overall, it will be suggested that the party's membership remained disappointing in many respects, but that there was qualitative, as well as quantitative, improvement from the 1930s onwards. This, in turn, allowed the party to become an organic, if minor, part of British politics. In addition, it will become clear that the CPGB's features in this respect reflected problems faced by other Western Communist parties but also by the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and British Socialist Party (BSP) which were its main predecessors.

I

A key immediate aim of the British Communist party, as with all parties operating legally under the aegis of the Communist International (Comintern), was to achieve mass status. As the latter's Second World Congress (1920) agreed, '[t]he most important task of a genuine Communist Party [was] to maintain the closest possible contact with the widest sections of the proletariat'.⁴ The resolution on tactics at the Third Congress (1921) stated unequivocally that the Comintern's task was 'not to establish small Communist sects aiming to influence the working masses purely through agitation and propaganda, but to participate directly in the struggle of the working masses, establish Communist leadership of the struggle, and in the course of the struggle create large, revolutionary, mass Communist Parties'.⁵ The British party took this to heart. Even during its darkest days of isolation and falling membership, one of the most heinous crimes of which a party member could be accused was 'sectarianism'. Incantations towards the acquisition of a large membership were made repeatedly during the period. The 1935 party congress, for example, agreed that 'the building of a mass Communist Party ... is the sole path to ... the victory of the working class revolution in Britain and the establishment of the workers' dictatorship on the basis of Soviet Power for the building of socialism'.⁶ But it did not happen. The party, as is well known, remained small, although not insignificant; in retrospect it can be seen that it was never remotely close to seriously impinging upon the Labour party's hegemony over the British left. The central committee's 1924 lament that 'nine-tenths of our shortcomings are due to our small numerical membership' was to be an almost constant refrain before the exceptional conditions of the Second World War led to a dramatic increase in membership.⁷

⁴ 'The role of the Communist party in proletarian revolution', agreed 24 July 1920, reprinted in A. Adler, ed., *Theses, resolutions and manifestoes of the first four congresses of the Third International* (2nd edn, London, 1983), p. 71.

⁵ 'On tactics', agreed 12 July 1920, *ibid.*, p. 277; italics in original.

⁶ 'The Communist party and the united front', in CPGB, *Harry Pollitt speaks: a call to workers, with the resolutions of the XIII party congress* (London, n.d. [1935]), p. 57.

⁷ 'Report of the central executive committee', 17–19 May 1924, Manchester, National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) CP/CENT/CONG/01/06.

The newly available materials offer little that is radically different from the already established narrative of the fluctuations in overall party membership. But if there are no truly sensational revelations, there are some interesting additions to, and amendments of, what has hitherto been known. In particular, the fluctuation of membership around 1926 was even greater and more precipitate than has usually been acknowledged. The party had stumbled along with a membership of between 3,000 and 5,000 for most of the first five-and-a-half years after its formation in 1920. The figures published hitherto have shown a progression from 3,000 in May 1924, and 4,000 that September, to 5,000 in June 1925, to 6,000 in April 1926, and a peak of 10,730 in October of that year.⁸ This might be taken to suggest that membership was already some way along an upward trend before rising significantly around the time of the General Strike (May 1926) and the six-month mining lockout that followed it.

The new figures qualify this scenario somewhat (see Table 1). They show that membership was not on much of an upward curve at all prior to the spring of 1926: the figure for that January (4,900) was, in fact, slightly lower than that for ten months before. When this is combined with the fact that membership in October 1926 had reached 11,500 or even 12,000 rather than the 10,730 which the party's acting secretary claimed and which has found its way into the published figures, it becomes clear that the increase in membership in the first ten months of 1926 was not merely dramatic, but sensational.⁹ There was genuine excitement in Comintern headquarters that 'the membership [had] more than double[d]!'.¹⁰

It would not do to make too much of the significance of the new figures here. We are talking about a discrepancy in the region of around 1,000: if the new figure is accepted it is, in relative terms, only about 10 per cent greater than the previously published one, and in absolute terms membership was still pitifully low (the Labour party had around 200,000 individual members at the time).¹¹ However, it does add a little to our knowledge. In addition, it shows that the fall in membership which followed must have reflected even more badly than hitherto believed on the established party leadership, both in Moscow and with many of the remaining members of the party in Britain.

⁸ Pelling, *British Communist party*, p. 192; Macfarlane, *British Communist party*, p. 302.

⁹ Organization department of executive committee of the Communist International (ECCI) to CPGB, n.d. [but c. Dec. 1926 or Jan. 1927], Moscow, Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary Historical Documents (RC) 495/3/13. The figure of 12,000 was mentioned at the seventh ECCI plenum in December 1926, but this has rarely been noticed by historians of the CPGB (Newton, *Sociology of British Communism*, p. 160, is an exception): see J. Degras, ed., *The Communist International: documents* (3 vols., London, 1956–65), II, p. 314; for 11,500, see minutes of British commission and British secretariat, 18 Nov. 1926, RC 495/72/14, fo. 196, and 'Tatsaechlichmateriel ueber England', 11 Oct. 1926, RC 495/25/301.

¹⁰ Bamatter, 'Tatsaechlichmateriel ueber England', 16 Sept. 1926, RC 495/25/301, fo. 71.

¹¹ Labour party, *Labour party annual report, 1929* (London, 1929), p. 58, where the 1928 figure (the first compiled) is given as 214,970.

Table 1 *CPGB membership, 1920-1946*

Year	Month	Membership	Year	Month	Membership
1920	August	5,125		October	6,396
1921	January	2,000-2,500	1928	January	5,000
	July	4,838		March	5,556
	August	4,677	1929	January	3,500
	September	4,633		October	4,100
	October	4,532		December	3,170
	November	4,269	1930	May	2,860
	December	3,906		July	2,800
1922	February	3,970		August	2,350
	May	4,000		November	2,555
	June	5,116	1931	February	2,711
	October	3,293		May	2,724
	November	2,761		June	3,054
	December	2,931		September	3,927
1923	September	3,083		November	6,279
	October	3,163		December	7,478
	November	3,269	1932	January	9,000
	December	3,309		November	5,600
1924	January	3,432	1933	February	5,500
	February	3,495		September	5,500
	March	3,550	1934	February	5,000
	April	3,528		October	5,421
	May	3,358		December	5,800
	June	3,612	1935	February	6,500
	July	3,635		July	7,500
	August	3,768	1936	February	7,000
	September	3,960		June	8,600
	October	4,149		October	11,000
	November	4,308		December	11,500
	December	4,371	1937	January	11,500
1925	March	5,000		May	12,500
	April	4,398	1938	September	15,781
	June	5,000		December	18,000
1926	January	4,900	1939	January	17,539
	April	6,000		July	17,756
	June	7,430	1940	January	19,605
	September	10,730		March	20,000
	October	12,000	1941	June	15,000-20,000
	December	11,271		December	22,738
1927	January	9,000	1942	December	56,000
	February	7,909	1943	December	55,138
	August	7,377	1945	March	45,435
			1946	April	42,123

The precipitate fall in membership after the end of the mining lockout has been much commented upon in the literature. Too often, however, a misleading reason is given for the fall. Typically, the argument has been that, apart from a 'natural' wasting away of membership due to the end of the lockout and the victimization and demoralization that followed it, members left the party because of the new combative and sectarian line of 'class against class', which replaced during 1928–9 the previous policy of trying to unite with other working-class organizations in a 'united front'.¹² Yet here again the published figures give a misleading impression, because they are without two crucial sets of data. Basing themselves on *Inprecorr*, Pelling, Macfarlane, and Newton claimed that the membership in October 1927 – at the time of the Soviet party congress which saw the first moves in Moscow towards class against class – was 7,377.¹³ This figure then fell, to 5,500 in March 1928 as the new line became clear following the ninth executive committee of the Communist International plenum (February 1928) and deteriorated steadily to 3,500 in January 1929, by which time it was fully in operation, and 3,200 in December of that year.¹⁴ The picture offered by the new figures qualifies this view. Although the figure of around 7,500 was reported to the party congress in October 1927, it was seen, even at the time, as an overestimate.¹⁵ In fact, it was the figure for August 1927; by the time of the congress, membership stood at 6,396.¹⁶ It then fell further, to 5,000 in January 1928, even before the ninth plenum.¹⁷ In short, party membership was back to pre-General Strike levels even before the promulgation of class against class, and still more so before the British party began to operate it fully during 1929. This would tend to lend support to the view that the impact of the introduction of the 'new line' on party membership was by no means as disastrous as has often been alleged.¹⁸ Indeed, party membership appears to have risen to around 4,100 during the third quarter of 1929, in the aftermath of the general election which saw the installation of the second Labour government.¹⁹ This figure was still higher than those prevailing for most of the period before 1925.

¹² See e.g. N. Branson, *History of the Communist party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London, 1986), p. 48.

¹³ Pelling, *British Communist party*, p. 192; Macfarlane, *British Communist party*, p. 302; Newton, *Sociology of British Communism*, p. 159.

¹⁴ Pelling, *British Communist party*, p. 159. Pelling does not quote, or was unaware of, the March 1928 figure, which means that his table shows a sharp drop between two successive figures, viz. from 7,377 in October 1927 to 3,500 in January 1929.

¹⁵ Minutes of central committee, 28–9 Oct. 1927, RC 495/100/417, fos. 215–17.

¹⁶ CPGB ninth congress, 8–10 Oct. 1927, NMLH, CP/CENT/CONG/02/02, fo. 15.

¹⁷ 'To the members of the British commission of the CI', 16 Feb. 1928, RC 495/100/522, fo. 2.

¹⁸ For a trenchant defence of class against class in this respect, see M. Squires, 'CPGB membership during the class against class years', *Socialist History*, 3 (1993), pp. 4–13.

¹⁹ Report by Richard Sorge in minutes of Anglo-American secretariat of the Communist International (AAS), 1 Oct. 1929, RC 495/72/52, fo. 44.

The other period for which significant new material is added is the time immediately before the Second World War. Here, the existing figures give us 15,570 members in September 1938 and 17,756 in July 1939.²⁰ The newly available material confirms these numbers, but also adds something more. For the membership shot up to 18,000 in December 1938, before hitting something of a plateau with 17,539 in the following month – very close to the figure for July 1939.²¹ It would seem that this highlights the point made by a number of authors about the party's general paralysis, and the ultimate futility of the popular front strategy of a combination of all anti-government forces. After a period of rapid expansion, the popular front had run out of steam.²²

The newly opened archives also give us a much fuller picture of membership of the Young Communist League (YCL) than has hitherto been available. Here, the broad trends in party membership are followed: the 1920s peak of 1,800 came towards the end of 1926; the trough was reached in August 1930 when membership was between 200 and 300, and there was then a rapid increase in the wake of the collapse of the Labour government in August 1931 and the general election which followed; the figure then fell back somewhat, but increased dramatically to new heights in 1937–8 before tailing off a little in early 1939.²³

II

If the material now available only told us that much about the membership of the party, there would not be much reason to get excited. A tweaking of the existing figures, even if it does lead to some need to reconsider the impact of the General Strike, class against class and the popular front, would not, in itself, amount to much more than a footnote. However, the evidence is now available to provide a much more empirically sound qualitative portrait of the party membership than hitherto, and it is here where the greatest interest lies. The first thing to consider is the character of the Communist party's membership.

The material available confirms the existing view that the Communist party

²⁰ Pelling, *British Communist party*, p. 192; Newton, *Sociology of British Communism*, p. 159.

²¹ J. R. Campbell, 'The Communist party of Great Britain: from the 17th to the 18th congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union', 3 Feb. 1939, RC 495/100/1037, fo. 7; memorandum, 'Party membership', n.d. [1939], RC 495/100/1040, fos. 1–3.

²² K. Morgan, *Against fascism and war: ruptures and continuities in British Communist politics, 1935–1941* (Manchester, 1989), p. 75. See also M. Sylvers, 'American Communists in the popular front period: reorganization or disorganization?', *Journal of American Studies*, 23 (1989), pp. 375–93; J. Jackson, *The popular front in France: defending democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 281–4.

²³ Robert Stewart to Comintern secretariat, 23 May 1924, RC 495/100/48, fo. 52; minutes of British secretariat, 12 Apr. 1927, RC 495/72/24, fo. 20; CPGB ninth congress, 8–10 Oct. 1927, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/02/02; 'Report of organisational situation of YCL to the party CC', n.d. [1930], RC 495/100/673, fo. 360; Harry Pollitt in minutes of English commission of AAS, 11 Aug. 1930, 495/72/92, fo. 16; Squires, 'CPGB membership', p. 10; anon. document, 'Party membership', n.d. [1939], RC 495/100/1040.

was very much a man's party. This was not how it was supposed to be: the Comintern had been clear from the very beginning that its parties should recruit women in large numbers. But this was something that the CPGB, along with all other Western Communist parties in the period, found very difficult to achieve.²⁴ In June 1922, when the party was claiming a membership of 5,116, only 550 of these (11 per cent) were women.²⁵ There then appears to have been a slight improvement: between 1924 and the end of the General Strike in May 1926, the proportion of women in the party varied between 14 and 16 per cent.²⁶ During the mining lockout, recruitment among women did improve relative to that of men, which was no small feat given that male recruitment was also buoyant at the time. Most of these were the wives of locked out miners, suggesting a precedent for the militant actions of many miners' wives in the 1984–5 coal strike.²⁷ By the end of the year, the party had around 2,500 women members, who represented about 21 per cent of the overall membership.²⁸ However, most of these left the party over the next year, and by March 1928 the proportion of women members was back down to 900 out of a total of 5,556 – that is, around 16 per cent.²⁹

The issue remained problematic in the 1930s. In December 1931 the ECCI presidium was moved to castigate the party for its lack of attention to work among women, which had so far been 'completely neglected'.³⁰ It appears, though, that there was little improvement in the party's gender balance for most of the remainder of the decade. In October 1934, only 14.75 per cent of the party's membership was female.³¹ The 13th Congress in 1935 called for 'particular attention to the question of recruiting women into the Party', but it seems that little significant progress was made.³² The next congress, in 1937, passed a resolution specifically on the issue, calling for a 'decisive turn ... in the whole approach to the Party's work amongst women'.³³ This does seem to have had some effect, although it seems possible that the party's emphasis on the prevention of war was at least as effective as the creation of party women's

²⁴ See e.g. E. D. Weitz, *Popular Communism: political strategies and social histories in the formation of the German, French and Italian Communist parties, 1919–1948* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), pp. 9–10, 17, 28–9.

²⁵ CPGB, 'Report on party membership', 12 June 1922, RC 495/100/63, fo. 93.

²⁶ Stewart to Comintern secretariat, 23 May 1924, RC 495/100/48, fos. 52–5; CPGB, *Seventh national congress* (London, 1925), p. 144; CPGB organization department to ECCI, 'Statistics of the CPGB position in 1926', Oct. 1926, RC 495/100/364, fos. 114–17.

²⁷ H. Sturm, 'Protokoll der Besprechung mit der britischen Delegation', 14 June 1926, RC 495/25/300, fo. 24; ECCI orgburo minutes, 26 June 1926, *ibid.*, fo. 15; L. Loach, 'We'll be here right to the end ... and after: women in the miners' strike', in H. Beynon, ed., *Digging deeper: issues in the miners' strike* (London, 1985), pp. 169–79.

²⁸ Degras, ed., *Communist International*, II, p. 314.

²⁹ 'Materials for the organisation department of the CPGB', Mar. 1928, RC 495/100/522, fos. 11–12.

³⁰ 'Resolution of the ECCI presidium on the immediate tasks of the Communist Party of Great Britain', 29 Dec. 1931, NMLH CP/CENT/CI/01/04.

³¹ Minutes of ECCI presidium, 11 Oct. 1934, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 25.

³² CPGB, *Harry Pollitt speaks*, p. 68.

³³ CPGB, *It can be done: report of the fourteenth congress of the CPGB* (London, n.d. [1937]), p. 302.

groups demanded by the 1937 resolution, not least since many districts were tardy in establishing the new organs.³⁴ One district which did make an effort was Manchester, and there women amounted to 25 per cent of the party membership in March 1938: this may have reflected the relatively high level of female participation in the paid labour market, especially in the textile industry.³⁵ The Second World War finally saw an overall improvement: by March 1945, 26 per cent (11,978) of the party's membership was female.³⁶

Even so, this was hardly spectacular success. There was a far higher proportion of women among Labour party individual members, the figure standing at around 42 per cent throughout the period for which figures are available (1933 onwards).³⁷ One of the key problems was that the CPGB was so centred, in its thoughts and actions, upon industrial work. It was a party of production, rather than consumption. What was needed were working women, but they often proved difficult to recruit. Housewives formed the largest part of the female membership between the wars, and it seems likely that most of these had Communist husbands.³⁸ It was only during the Second World War that the party began to change its approach somewhat, and began to stress that housewives could be valuable comrades.³⁹ It is difficult to discern whether this led to more recruitment among women, or whether it was forced on the party by the large number of housewives coming into the CPGB, but one suspects the latter may have more credibility.

The CPGB was not only a man's party, but a young man's party. Again, there are parallels with other Communist parties, for example the German. Although the level of CPGB membership was so low that it would be hard to sustain a youth/middle age dichotomy between it and Labour, as has been postulated for the Social Democrats and the Communists in Germany,⁴⁰ it none the less seems likely that the CPGB's membership was, on average, younger than that of its larger rival. Here, the new records are less helpful, since reports to Moscow rarely made much of the age of party members. None the less, two points can be made. First, the leaders of the party were, on the whole, relatively young men when they attained their positions: Rajani Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt were only twenty-six and thirty-two respectively when they were appointed (along with Harry Inkpin) to the party commission established to report on reorganization in 1922. It was later possible for men like Peter

³⁴ CPGB, *For peace and plenty: report of the fifteenth congress of the CPGB* (London, n.d. [1938]), pp. 160–1.

³⁵ 'Report of the Manchester district committee', Mar. 1938, NMLH CP/LOC/NW/1/08.

³⁶ CPGB, *Report of the executive committee: covering the period September, 1944 to August, 1945* (London, 1945), p. 17.

³⁷ Calculated from figures in Labour party, *Labour party annual report, 1945* (London, 1945), p. 17.

³⁸ B. Darke, *The Communist technique in Britain* (London, 1953), pp. 107–8.

³⁹ CPGB, *Documents for congress: a collection of the principal political statements issued by the Communist party between July 1943 and August 1944* (London, 1944), p. 46.

⁴⁰ E. D. Weitz, 'State power, class fragmentation and the shaping of German Communist politics', *Journal of Modern History*, 62 (1990), pp. 253–97, at pp. 290–1; D. Geary, *European labour politics from 1900 to the depression* (London, 1991), p. 69.

Kerrigan (born 1899), D. F. 'Dave' Springhall (born 1901), and William Rust (born 1903) to rise to positions of prominence during the early 1930s. Second, the age of delegates at party congresses tended to be on the young side: the proportion of delegates under thirty at party congresses between 1935 and 1944 was 33.5 per cent in 1935, 47.2 per cent in 1937, 41.9 per cent in 1938, 36 per cent in 1943 and 34.5 per cent in 1944.

In terms of social status, the party was overwhelmingly working class in membership throughout the period. There had been a small leavening of middle-class 'intellectuals' in the early days, such as William Mellor, J. T. Walton Newbold, Cecil l'Estrange Malone, Ellen Wilkinson, and Sylvia Pankhurst. However, they were viewed with suspicion by many of their working-class 'comrades';⁴¹ and most of them had departed the scene by late 1924. Albert Inkpin, the CPGB secretary, reported to the party congress in May 1925 that the members were 'practically all proletarians', the number of intellectuals being 'almost infinitesimal'.⁴² The party's membership in March 1928 comprised 95 per cent members of the working class and only 5 per cent intellectuals and professionals.⁴³ This did not change massively during the 1930s. The so-called 'entry of the intellectuals' in the 1930s did not amount to much in numerical terms. For every writer, student, or scientist who became a Communist there were dozens, if not hundreds, of workers. The party did try harder to recruit middle-class members from the mid-1930s onwards, and it may be that there was a degree of success among the minority of white-collar workers who had done badly in the slump.⁴⁴ But a strain of anti-intellectualism remained, as in 1938 when the hard-bitten party veteran Robert Stewart warned against 'these unscrupulous semi-intellectuals who pose as left revolutionaries, who put the r's [sic] in barricades, instead of putting their arse on the barricades'.⁴⁵ Significantly, the speech was not included in the published version of the congress proceedings; but the fact that the comment had been made by such an experienced and senior figure said a lot about real attitudes within the party behind the veneer of popular front-induced angling for middle-class support.

Within the working class, there were further biases in party membership. Raphael Samuel has written that the party was dominated by engineers.⁴⁶ There was certainly a significant engineering cohort, as will be seen below. However, the attention paid to the engineers by some historians has tended

⁴¹ J. Jones, *Unfinished journey* (London, 1938), p. 193.

⁴² CPGB, *Seventh national congress*, p. 35.

⁴³ 'Materials for the organisation department of the CPGB', Mar. 1928, RC 495/100/522, fos. 11-12.

⁴⁴ See e.g. F. D. Klingender, 'Winning the intellectuals', *Communist Review*, May 1935; H. White, 'Winning the middle classes', *Communist Review*, June 1935; J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *Britain in the depression: society and politics, 1929-1939* (London, 1994), p. 155.

⁴⁵ Verbatim report of the fifteenth party congress, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/04/07.

⁴⁶ R. Samuel, 'Class politics: the lost world of British Communism, part three', *New Left Review*, 165 (1987), pp. 52-91, at p. 59.

somewhat to obscure the fact that this was, for much of the period, a party of miners.⁴⁷ The party recruited strongly around the mining lockouts of 1921 and, especially, 1926. In March 1927 the party census found that more than half of the total membership came from mining.⁴⁸ In Tyneside, which had been a notorious weakspot for the party before 1926, the party membership soared in that year. This influx was overwhelmingly from the coal industry. In early 1927, 1,658 of the district's 1,919 members were miners (86 per cent); there were just 11 engineers.⁴⁹ However, the high hopes that this rate of recruitment would increase, or even continue, were dashed: Nat Watkins's October 1926 hope that there would be 100,000 miners in the CPGB 'in the next few months', always very ambitious, looked simply ridiculous a year later.⁵⁰ Furthermore, even though miners were no longer coming into the party, and were in many cases leaving it, the CPGB membership was still very unbalanced. Especially problematic was the fact that the mining areas were largely isolated from other industrial centres; the high proportion of miners meant that the party tended to be weak in the main provincial cities.⁵¹ In May 1927 the Eighth ECCI Plenum stated that '[o]rganisationally the chief task of the CPGB is to correct the disproportion existing between its membership in the mining industry and the other basic industries in the country, and to develop the Party as a powerful mass Party of the workers'.⁵² But this, like most Comintern pronouncements, was easier said than done. Although party membership fell, the imbalance remained. In October 1929 Richard Sorge (having served briefly as a Comintern agent in Britain) reported to Moscow that coal was the only industry where the party had any real basis, and at the British Commission in Moscow in August 1930 the new general secretary, Pollitt, told his interlocutors that miners were 'predominant' in the party's membership.⁵³

Although the miners had predominated for much of the early period of the party's life, it is important not to go too far. Other groups were important, even at that stage. The engineers were a case in point. While in terms of sheer numbers they could not compete with the miners, they did provide some of the party's leading figures. And, during the 1930s, the balance did begin to shift somewhat. By 1932 miners and engineers were joined by railwaymen, textile workers, builders, and the distributive trades as industries where there was a Communist presence, albeit in some cases a small one.⁵⁴ By early 1936 membership among miners was falling more rapidly than the membership of

⁴⁷ J. Hinton, *Shop floor citizens: engineering democracy in 1940s Britain* (Aldershot, 1994); N. Fishman, *The British Communist party and the trade unions, 1933–1945* (Aldershot, 1995).

⁴⁸ Minutes of politbureau, 25 Mar. 1927, RC 495/100/419, fo. 50.

⁴⁹ Party census materials, Jan. and Feb. 1927, n.d. [c. Mar. 1927], RC 495/100/435, fos. 14, 30–1.

⁵⁰ CPGB, *Ninth congress*, p. 125, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/02/02.

⁵¹ Minutes of central executive committee, 28–30 Apr. 1928, RC 495/100/494, fos. 19–20.

⁵² CPGB, *Ninth congress*, p. 125, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/02/02.

⁵³ Minutes of AAS, 1 Oct. 1929, RC 495/72/52, fo. 44; minutes of English commission of AAS, 11 Aug. 1930, 495/72/92, fo. 6.

⁵⁴ CPGB, 12th congress, p. 34, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/03/01.

the party as a whole.⁵⁵ Three years later, the party could count, not only mining, but engineering, distribution, and passenger transport as areas of particular strength; and, whereas in 1934 there had only been one Communist on a national trade union executive committee, there were now forty-three, in numerous unions.⁵⁶ By August 1939, the figure had risen to sixty-four, on the executives of thirty-two unions, and although certain big unions – such as the Transport and General Workers' Union, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, and the Amalgamated Engineering Union – remained to be cracked, it was anticipated that improvements here, too, would not be long in coming.⁵⁷ Overall, while much of the party's membership continued to come from the mining industry, what was happening was that other industries were now providing more members to the party. The development of rank-and-file movements was clearly important in diversifying the party's industrial base. While hard evidence is thin on the ground for the later part of our period, there are indications in the congress reports that the former predominance of mining had come to an end. Among delegates to the National Conference of May 1942, the main industrial occupations were engineering (414 out of 1,323 delegates); electrical and building (92); mining (73); railways (41); shipbuilding (35); and transport (31), and this pattern remained broadly true for the party congress in 1944.⁵⁸

A further feature of Communist party members was that they were more likely than the rest of the population, for much of the period at any rate, to be unemployed. This does not appear to have been the case at first. As late as October 1926, only 6 per cent of the membership came into this category.⁵⁹ Thereafter, however, things changed, and the CPGB became like most of its Western counterparts in having members who were likely to be out of work.⁶⁰ This can be put down to three major factors: increased unemployment, especially in mining, where the bulk of the party's membership worked; the fact that the Communist party, through the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, ran the only real organization for the unemployed; and victimization of known radicals after the General Strike and the mining lockout, fostered by the activities of the Economic League, with its relatively

⁵⁵ Minutes of Marty secretariat of the Communist International, 20 Feb. 1936, RC 495/100/1020, fo. 18.

⁵⁶ J. R. Campbell, 'The Communist party of Great Britain: from the 17th to the 18th congress of the Communist party of the Soviet Union', 3 Feb. 1939, RC 495/100/1037, fos. 7–8; memorandum, 'Party membership', n.d. [1939], RC 495/100/1040, fos. 1–3.

⁵⁷ Anon. document, 'E.C. members', n.d. [but c. Aug. 1939], RC 495/100/1040, fos. 78–9.

⁵⁸ CPGB, *The Communist party on the way to win: decisions of the national conference of the Communist party of Great Britain, May 1942* (London, n.d. [1942]); CPGB, *Victory, peace, security: report of the 17th national congress of the Communist party* (London, n.d. [1944]), p. 64.

⁵⁹ CPGB organization department to ECCI, Oct. 1926, RC 495/100/364, fos. 114–17.

⁶⁰ E. D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: from popular protests to socialist state* (Princeton, NJ, 1997), pp. 144–6; I. McDougall, ed., *Militant miners: recollections of John McArthur, Buchhaven; and letters, 1924–1926, of David Proudfoot, Methil, to G. Allen Hutt* (Edinburgh, 1981), p. 144.

sophisticated blacklisting techniques.⁶¹ By July 1930, 40 per cent of party members were unemployed, and this figure rose to between 50 and 60 per cent over the next year.⁶² The strong recruitment in late 1931 was ‘almost exclusively among the unemployed’, not surprisingly given that the Labour government had taken some measures to reduce expenditure in the area, and that the national government, which came to office in August 1931, had cut benefits by 10 per cent.⁶³ By late 1932, 60 per cent of party members were out of work; in some districts the figure was even higher, that for Scotland being 70 per cent.⁶⁴ In some districts, the party continued for much of the decade to have a high proportion of unemployed members: in May 1934 it was reported that 75 per cent of South Wales members were jobless, and in May 1937, that 40 per cent of members in Glasgow were in that position.⁶⁵ But these were particularly depressed areas; and, as the economy recovered in other parts of the country in the mid- and later 1930s, CPGB membership became less unbalanced in this respect. By January 1937, Pollitt could report that over 75 per cent of the party’s members were employed.⁶⁶ This all served to increase CPGB influence in the trade unions and in industry.

III

The newly available papers, when added to material previously available, also give us information on the geographical location of Communist party membership, and how this changed over time (see Table 2).⁶⁷ Broadly, the trend over the period as a whole was from exceptional concentration towards a slightly broader coverage of the country. Even at the end of the period, the

⁶¹ A. J. McIvor, ‘“A crusade for capitalism”: the Economic League, 1919–1939’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23 (1988), pp. 631–55.

⁶² Jakob to Comintern, 22 July 1930, RC 495/100/662, fos. 69–72; CPGB central agit-prop department to all districts and locals, 15 June 1931, NMLH CP/IND/DUTT/29/02; minutes of politbureau, 27 July 1931, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 12.

⁶³ Organization department of ECCI to central committee of CPGB, 27 Dec. 1931, RC 495/100/728, fos. 217–18.

⁶⁴ Minutes of AAS bureau, n.d. [c. Oct. 1932], RC 495/72/158, fos. 1–2; CPGB 12th congress report, p. 42, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/03/01.

⁶⁵ Minutes of politbureau, 3 May 1934, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 15; CPGB, *It can be done*, p. 165. ⁶⁶ Minutes of ECCI secretariat, 4 Jan. 1937, RC 495/100/1149, fo. 272.

⁶⁷ The figures in this section, and included in the table, are derived from the following sources: CPGB, ‘The party commission: first report’, n.d. [1922], RC 495/100/61, fos. 4–6; CPGB, ‘Report on party membership’, 12 June 1922, RC 495/100/63, fo. 93; CPGB central committee, ‘Analysis of membership in January 1924’, n.d. [c. Feb. 1925], RC 495/100/166, fos. 2–5; CPGB central committee, ‘Comparison of district totals (CPGB), March–December 1924’, n.d. [c. Jan. 1925], *ibid.*, fo. 83a; CPGB, ‘Organising report of central committee to eighth party congress’, Oct. 1926, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/01/08; CPGB ninth congress, 8–10 Oct. 1927; CP/CENT/CONG/02/02, p. 15; ‘Materials for organisation department of the CPGB’, Mar. 1928, RC 495/100/522, fos. 11–12; minutes of English commission of AAS, 11 Aug. 1930, RC 495/72/92, fo. 5; minutes of central committee, 7 Sept. 1933, NMLH, CPGB microfilm, reel 4; Springhall to Dutt, 21 Dec. 1934, CP/IND/DUTT/06/02; CPGB, *It can be done*, pp. 163–4; anon. document, ‘Party membership’, n.d. [but c. Feb. 1939], RC 495/100/1040, fos. 1–3.

Table 2 *Distribution of CPGB membership between districts (%)*

Date	London	Scotland	Lancashire	South Wales	Midlands	Yorkshire	Tyneside	Other
Feb. 1922	31.4	24.0	20.7	9.7	6.5	5.3	2.5	0.0
June 1922	29.3	23.5	19.5	11.7	5.9	7.0	3.0	0.1
Jan. 1924	29.1	17.4*	12.6	10.1	3.3	10.3	4.1	13.1*
Dec. 1924	27.9	17.8*	10.2	9.8	4.3	10.7	3.7	15.6*
Sept. 1926	14.5	20.8	11.7	14.0	3.0	13.5	17.7	4.8
Oct. 1927	20.7	23.5	10.0	20.3	2.8	6.6	11.5	4.6
Mar. 1928	23.5	18.5	12.0	21.6	3.0	5.8	10.6	5.0
Aug. 1930	32.1	17.9	10.2	12.4	2.9	12.5	5.1	6.9
July 1935	33.3	n/a	n/a	17.3	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Dec. 1936	34.8	15.7	n/a	7.0	3.5	n/a	n/a	n/a
Apr. 1937	39.2	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Sept. 1938	39.2	19.5	10.5	6.1	5.9	6.6	3.4	8.8
Jan. 1939	41.5	16.0	10.5	5.7	6.6	7.4	3.1	9.2
June 1939	40.5	16.2	7.7	6.0	7.1	7.6	2.8	12.1

* These figures under-represent 'Scotland' and over-represent 'Other', since the figure given for Scotland is for Glasgow only and most of the 'others' were in fact in Scotland (particularly the Fife coalfield).

membership of the party was still very largely concentrated in a few key areas, but it was at least possible for the party to claim that by 1945 it had a wider national coverage than it had had in its early years.

The first data available are for the first quarter of 1922. They show that the whole of the party's membership was categorized as coming from one of seven areas: London (31.4 per cent), Scotland (24.0), Lancashire (20.7), South Wales (9.7), the Midlands (6.5), Yorkshire (5.3), and Tyneside (2.5).⁶⁸ A survey for June of that year revealed much the same results.⁶⁹

The two strongest districts, London and Scotland, remained in first and second place almost uninterrupted throughout the interwar period; and, since they were also the only parts of Britain ever to elect Communist MPs, they deserve to be seen as the real centres of the CPGB's strength. London's pre-eminence was not unpredictable. The city had been one of the main areas of strength for the SDF and the BSP. Its sheer size in terms of population meant it was likely, in any case, to produce a significant proportion of the members of any political party. The presence of CPGB headquarters also played a part. Before the 1930s it was probably the one significant district of the party which did not depend largely on miners for its membership; and it was able to expand when the party's industrial efforts became better organized from 1932 onwards. Only during the rapid expansion of 1926 and its aftermath did London lose its pre-eminence within the party; thereafter, it first regained and then exceeded its former share of the party's membership. By 1939 two in every five Communists in Britain lived in London.

Scotland, as stated above, was the other part of Britain which consistently provided a large proportion of the CPGB's membership. Here, the Fife coalfield was especially important, as was Glasgow, although Edinburgh also had a vibrant, if smaller, Communist organization. Right up to 1938 it was providing about a fifth of the party's membership, although in 1939 this fell to about a sixth. Many of the leading figures within the party, such as Stewart, William Gallacher, and J. R. Campbell, were Scots.

The other two areas with which the CPGB was especially concerned were South Wales and Lancashire: along with London and Scotland, these formed the four 'concentration districts' identified in 1932 as the core areas upon which effort and resources should be focused. South Wales was always something of a frustration. It was the one area where the party was prepared to admit in private that there were defections in opposition to the class against class line.⁷⁰ The CPGB had some impact within the South Wales Miners' Federation, of which Arthur Horner was elected president in 1936. The party performed creditably, although not coming close to winning, in parliamentary elections in Rhondda East in the 1930s. Yet membership remained stubbornly low, other than in the period of the 1926 mining lockout and its aftermath. Admittedly, its population was lower than that of some of the other districts,

⁶⁸ CPGB, 'The party commission: first report', n.d. [1922], RC 495/100/61, fos. 4–6.

⁶⁹ CPGB, 'Report on party membership', 12 June 1922, RC 495/100/63, fo. 93.

⁷⁰ AAS, 'Report on party organisation', 20 Feb. 1931, RC 495/100/759, fos. 28–37.

but it was hardly a source of comfort that before the concentration districts policy it had provided about 12 per cent of the party's membership, whereas at the end of the decade, having been concentrated on for seven years, that proportion had halved.

Lancashire, the other concentration district, started brightly: in 1922 it was providing about a fifth of the party's members. As early as the end of 1924, however, this had fallen to a tenth, and it remained pretty constant at that level for most of the interwar period. Indeed, on the figures alone, it is difficult to discern why it should have been a concentration district at all. However, it was seen to have potential, not least by the Lancastrian Pollitt, who was the party's general secretary from 1929 onwards. For one thing, it had become, by the early 1930s, the crucible of very explosive industrial relations in the textile industry. Disputes over wages and the introduction of new working methods meant that Communists were perennially hopeful that the next big dispute would lead to a significant rise in membership. Second, it was an area with a high proportion of women in the paid industrial workforce; and for a party concerned to rectify its gender imbalance, this fact alone made it an obvious target. However, in the face of a relatively strong local Labour party, much working-class Conservatism and a high density of Roman Catholics, it could make little headway.

Had there been five concentration districts rather than four, then Yorkshire would almost certainly have been the fifth. Here, membership fluctuated very much indeed, but it remained a fairly important centre for the party, with Sheffield, home town of the early CPGB leader J. T. Murphy, particularly significant. Tyneside was another area of fluctuating membership. The district was very weak before 1926, being picked out by Inkpin in 1925 as giving 'cause for very serious consideration' because this weakness sat ill with its 'great potentialities to the Party'.⁷¹ Membership in the district then mushroomed during the mining lockout: as it soared to 2,000 and more the *Workers' Weekly* began to claim that it could become the strongest district in the CPGB.⁷² It was not to be, however; by the spring of 1927 all of the new branches formed during the lockout (amounting to the majority of all branches in the district) had collapsed,⁷³ and it reverted to type as one of the weakest areas for the party, with only 200 members by 1933.⁷⁴ During the 1930s it never provided more than one in twenty of CPGB members; by the outbreak of war in 1939 it was providing little more than one in forty. The Midlands, on the other hand, was a weak district in the 1920s but, being an engineering centre, its importance grew during the following decade.

By the later 1930s the party was also expanding into new territory. When Douglas Hyde first appeared in North Wales there was no CPGB organization

⁷¹ CPGB, *Seventh national congress*, p. 35.

⁷² 'Tatsaechlichmateriel ueber England', 16 Sept. 1926, RC 495/25/301, fos. 71-2.

⁷³ CPGB, 'Materials for party census', n.d. [c. Apr. 1927], RC 495/100/435.

⁷⁴ Central committee minutes, 7 Sept. 1933, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 4.

there to speak of, but by 1939 there were 90 Communists there.⁷⁵ By then there were also 310 Communists in the South Midlands (mainly in Oxford), 342 in the Eastern Counties, 300 in Kent (most of them, presumably, miners who had moved from other areas to the newly opened coalfield), and a couple of hundred in other areas which had, hitherto, been largely devoid of party organization. There were even 50 Communists in Devon.⁷⁶ Much of this progress came after the switch to the popular front line in 1935.⁷⁷

IV

Under what circumstances did the party recruit? First, during industrial disputes. As stated above, party membership rose during the mining lockouts of 1921 and 1926. At one point during the Bradford woollens lockout of 1930, the CPGB gained 200 new adherents, and the YCL 70.⁷⁸ There was some increase in party membership in Birmingham at the time of the Lucas strike there early in 1932, and again in the North Midlands at the time of the Harworth colliery dispute of 1937.⁷⁹ This is not to say – far from it – that every strike or lockout produced new recruits. But times of industrial conflict were, potentially, a good time for party recruitment.

The party also recruited around parliamentary election campaigns. The potential for this was recognized early on. Although there had been dispute about the use of parliamentary tactics on the formation of the party, there was a decision in favour. The party fought its first by-election at Caerphilly in August 1921, with Stewart as the candidate. Although he lost his deposit and Labour retained the seat, he took 2,592 votes (10.3 per cent of those cast), a reflection of the recent mining lockout in this coalfield seat, and the campaign seems to have led to some increase in recruitment in an area where the party had been almost non-existent.⁸⁰ Membership rose slightly during the period of the 1924 general election. During the 1929 election, there was also a rise in membership, and there was an even more significant one during the 1931 campaign, when 880 people were recruited,⁸¹ although this was obviously interlinked with the broader struggle against the benefit cuts being implemented by the national government. By-elections also offered opportunities for recruitment, particularly since they enabled the party to concentrate its modest resources of personnel on one area: at the Whitechapel St Georges by-election of December 1930, 67 new recruits were made for the party and 100 for the

⁷⁵ D. Hyde, *I believed: the autobiography of a former British Communist* (London, 1950), p. 45; anon. document, 'Party membership', n.d. [but c. Feb. 1939], RC 495/100/1040, fos. 1–3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ J. Shields and I. Loba, 'Report to ECCI secretariat on basic measures for the growth of the CPGB and its cadre policy', 24 Dec. 1936, RC 495/100/1021, fos. 125–41.

⁷⁸ Pollitt, 'Report on the woollen textile dispute in Great Britain', 5 June 1930, RC 495/100/678, fos. 49–51.

⁷⁹ Branson, *History of the Communist party*, pp. 96–7.

⁸⁰ R. Stewart, *Breaking the fetters* (London, 1967), pp. 113–19.

⁸¹ Minutes of politbureau, 5 Nov. 1931, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 12.

YCL: given that one of the reasons Labour did so badly in this election was a reaction against the government's proposals to restrict Jewish immigration to Palestine, it would appear likely that a large proportion of these recruits were Jews.⁸² On the other hand, the decision to run only two candidates at the 1935 election as a gesture towards popular front politics appears to have had a negative effect: there appears to have been confusion among rank-and-file Communists as to whether they should have been recruiting for their own party or for Labour, and some party members clearly took the new line too far to the right.⁸³

The party also recruited sometimes during specific campaigns that it was running. This was not always the case, especially in the earlier years of the period: the campaign to prevent British intervention in China, which peaked in early 1927, did very little to help the party's fortunes, and may even have damaged them. The Charter campaign of 1930–1, of which much had been expected, turned out to be something of a disappointment. However, the party's campaigning during the unemployment assistance board crisis of early 1935 did bring recruits into the party.⁸⁴ So did campaigns for tenants' rights, notably in Birmingham.⁸⁵ Campaigns from the 1930s onward were far more likely to be closely related to the immediate concerns of working-class life than those of the earlier period; and this clearly played a part in bedding the party into the British political scene. Certainly, such efforts tended to be more successful than recruitment campaigns per se. The latter were organized quite frequently, but rarely produced spectacular results: an issue was needed to excite people into joining. One illustration of the futility of such campaigns was that of spring 1930, which aimed to bring in 2,500 new members. It made no progress at all.⁸⁶

The best recruiter of all, of course, was the party's fight against fascism, both in Britain and abroad. At home, the British Union of Fascists (BUF) was formed by Sir Oswald Mosley in October 1932. The CPGB had identified Mosley with fascism even before then, seeing the BUF's forerunner, the New party, as a fascist organization, and this led to a number of violent clashes around the time of the 1931 general election.⁸⁷ As Mosley's tactics switched towards overt anti-semitism in 1934, the CPGB was fairly quick to organize counter-demonstrations, and so on, at a time when the Labour party, eager to establish its 'respectability', was reluctant to become embroiled in the kind of

⁸² RC 495/100/685, fo. 162, Pollitt to Robin Page Arnot [in Moscow], 9. Dec. 1930.

⁸³ Central committee minutes, 4 Jan. 1936, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 7; minutes of Marty secretariat, 20 Feb. 1936, RC 495/100/1020, fo. 1.

⁸⁴ Central committee minutes, 4 Jan. 1936, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 7. For the unemployment assistance board crisis, see F. M. Miller, 'The British unemployment assistance crisis of 1935', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 14 (1979), pp. 329–51.

⁸⁵ Morgan, *Against fascism and war*, p. 285.

⁸⁶ ECCI presidium, 'Resolution on the report of the central committee of the CPGB', 3 Mar. 1930, RC 495/100/645, fos. 34–9.

⁸⁷ A. Thorpe, *The British general election of 1931* (Oxford, 1991), p. 164.

streetfighting that inevitably ensued. This all led to a greater degree of support for the CPGB from among Jews, particularly those in the East End of London, the main area for Mosley's anti-Semitic campaign.⁸⁸ And as fascism abroad became increasingly threatening, the party and the USSR came to be seen by some as the staunchest obstacles to its advance, particularly during the early stages of the Spanish Civil War (1936–9).

This reflected a more general trend: that the party tended to have a better chance of recruiting strongly during periods when the Soviet Union was seen in a positive light. One does not have to subscribe to the view that British Communists were 'slaves of Moscow' to see that this was the case. As the success of the first Five Year Plan began to become apparent in the early 1930s, so CPGB membership rose. Similarly, the USSR's role in the fight against Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945 also helped the party to recruit very strongly indeed. Conversely, less favourable views of the Soviet state – particularly at the time of the Terror in the later 1930s – do seem to have had, at least, a dampening effect on recruitment, a trend which would become still more apparent during the Cold War.⁸⁹

V

There were thus a number of periods when the Communist party was able to recruit members quite successfully. But one of the central problems it faced was that it always found it difficult to retain members, and turnover remained very high. In September 1921, for example, 320 new members were enrolled, but 200 others lapsed.⁹⁰ The party commission concluded in 1922 that about new 600 to 900 members a year were coming in, but that about 1,000 members were leaving.⁹¹ In 1925, a big recruiting drive in the Manchester district brought in 150 new members; but, as the district organizer lamented, 'not two of them remained in the Party'.⁹² Even when the overall membership figure was static, there tended to be a large turnover of members: as Inkpin put it, '[m]any workers join, and within a few weeks go out again'.⁹³ The failure to retain the vast influx of new members gained as a result of the mining lockout in 1926 has already been noted above; the same thing happened, on a much lesser scale, in the west Yorkshire woollens dispute in the spring of 1930.⁹⁴ The problem continued to dog the CPGB. In June 1931 its agit-prop department told districts and locals that '[i]f the Party had retained the members it ha[d]

⁸⁸ J. Shields and I. Loba, 'Report to ECCI secretariat on basic measures for the growth of the CPGB and its cadre policy', 24 Dec. 1936, RC 495/100/1021, fos. 125–41.

⁸⁹ For more on this, see A. Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British politics', *History*, 83 (1998), pp. 608–27.

⁹⁰ CPGB to ECCI, 14 Nov. 1921, RC 495/100/26, fo. 24.

⁹¹ 'The party commission: first report', n.d. [1922], RC 495/100/61, fo. 5.

⁹² CPGB, *Seventh national congress*, p. 40.

⁹³ Minutes of central executive committee, 3–4 Oct. 1925, RC 495/100/231, fo. 44.

⁹⁴ Resolution of central committee and Comintern commission, July 1930, NMLH CP/IND/DUTT/29/01; minutes of politbureau, 13 Nov. 1930, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 11.

recruited over a period of years, it would be more than three times its present size'.⁹⁵ In November 1932 Pollitt told the party congress that 2,500 new members had been gained since January, but that 2,000 had left.⁹⁶ Weak retention was mentioned as a major reason for falling membership early in 1936.⁹⁷ In Fife, 265 new recruits joined the party after Gallacher's election as MP there in 1935, but only 161 (61.2 per cent) of these remained a year later.⁹⁸ In 1938 the Manchester district noted that its membership would have been 650, rather than 545, had all the new recruits made over the past year been retained.⁹⁹

This turnover of membership was a central feature of many Communist parties in the period. It affected the German party (KPD), which gained 143,000 members in 1930 but at the same time lost 95,000 others.¹⁰⁰ It was also a feature of the much smaller American Communist party (CPUSA): it grew from 10,000 members in 1928 to 12,000 in 1932, but this net increase masked the fact that only 3,000 of the 1932 membership had been in the party before 1930.¹⁰¹ Why was it such a feature of the CPGB?

It was frequently due to poor organization. The party machine on the ground was often 'so rotten' that it simply could not cope with any influx of new members.¹⁰² In particular, party training was often utterly inadequate, or else so stifflingly comprehensive as to put new recruits off.¹⁰³ The party tried to learn from its mistakes here, but even despite the imploring of the ECCI presidium, little improvement emerged, certainly before the later 1930s.¹⁰⁴ The sheer scale of new recruitment could overwhelm any attempts to assimilate new members, as was found in the Birmingham district in late 1931.¹⁰⁵ During the Second World War, disruption due to air raids during the war also created problems.¹⁰⁶

Then there was the somewhat off-putting atmosphere which new recruits to the party often found when they attended their first meetings. Some locals were dominated by cliques which only saw 'outsiders' as a threat.¹⁰⁷ John McArthur, a Scottish activist, recalled how 600 new members were made in two towns in

⁹⁵ CPGB agit-prop department circular, 15 June 1931, NMLH CP/IND/DUTT/29/02.

⁹⁶ CPGB 12th congress, p. 51, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/03/01.

⁹⁷ Minutes of central committee, 4 Jan. 1936, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 7.

⁹⁸ J. Shields and I. Loba, 'Report to ECCI secretariat on basic measures for the growth of the CPGB and its cadre policy', 24 Dec. 1936, RC 495/100/1021, fos. 125-41.

⁹⁹ 'Report of the Manchester district committee', Mar. 1938, NMLH CP/LOC/NW/1/08.

¹⁰⁰ B. Fowkes, *Communism in Germany under the Weimar republic* (London, 1984), p. 176.

¹⁰¹ I. Howe and L. Coser, *The American Communist party: a critical history* (Boston, MA, 1957), p. 528.

¹⁰² Minutes of politbureau, 5 Apr. 1934, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 15.

¹⁰³ Minutes of AAS, 1 Oct. 1929, RC 495/72/52, fo. 44; Jakob to Comintern, 22 July 1930, RC 495/100/662, fos. 69-72.

¹⁰⁴ 'Resolution of the ECCI presidium on the immediate tasks of the Communist Party of Great Britain', 29 Dec. 1931, NMLH CP/CENT/CI/01/04.

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of politbureau, 12 Nov. 1931, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 12.

¹⁰⁶ 'Report of the London committee of the Communist party, Sept. 1943-Dec. 1944', NMLH CP/LON/CONG/0/06.

¹⁰⁷ R. W. Robson, 'Party recruiting and building campaign', *Communist Review*, Feb. 1935.

Fifeshire in 1926, but that the party ‘did not know how best to retain ... and build around them’ because it ‘still had the old rigid, and in many cases sectarian, approach’.¹⁰⁸ There was, said one delegate to the 1938 congress, too little recognition that new recruits would not be good ‘bolsheviks’ when they first arrived, but that they would be ‘good working-class comrades who want[ed] to become Bolsheviks’.¹⁰⁹ Such ‘left sectarianism’ came to be much condemned from about 1931 onwards, but was still a problem, in London at any rate, towards the end of the decade.¹¹⁰

But even where they were not put off by their initial reception, many new recruits were soon weighed down by the amount of work they were expected to do. Party membership meant attendance at frequent meetings; activity in trade unions and other outside bodies; membership of ‘front’ organizations; the sale of literature; and so on. It was often very difficult for people to fit such activities into their working, social, and family lives.¹¹¹ The sheer magnitude of work expected of members, in short, led to a high wastage of new recruits, which in turn, of course, made the burdens of those who remained still heavier.

The high subscriptions demanded of party members were also a problem.¹¹² At the rules conference in Manchester in April 1921, these were set at 6d per week, although wives of party members and youths were allowed to pay only half, and the unemployed were exempted from payment.¹¹³ Even after complaints from branches that many people who would otherwise have been members of the party could not afford to join, or to remain, the subscription was set in 1922 at 1s per month, or 6d for concessions; however, the 6d was now a minimum, which even the unemployed were expected to pay.¹¹⁴ Although the January 1924 decision to allow weekly payment would have eased the situation somewhat, the basic problem – that the party was making demands too heavy for many working-class budgets to bear – remained.¹¹⁵ The depressed state of many areas where the party could have hoped to recruit well meant that this was a problem throughout the interwar period: in October 1934, Pollitt estimated that 90 per cent of the 400 members who had left the party that year had ‘been unemployed for many, many years’.¹¹⁶ It was only perhaps during the Second World War, with full employment giving people more money but rationing leaving them with less to spend it on, that this ceased

¹⁰⁸ McDougall, *Militant miners*, p. 141.

¹⁰⁹ CPGB 15th congress, verbatim record, Jack Gaster, 19 Sept. 1938, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/04/09.

¹¹⁰ ‘Discussion statement’, CPGB London district congress, 1938, NMLH CP/LON/CONG/0/05. ¹¹¹ Darke, *Communist technique*, pp. 11, 69. ¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

¹¹³ CPGB, ‘Constitution and rules as adopted at the special delegate conference at Manchester, April 23rd and 24th 1921’, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/01/03.

¹¹⁴ ‘Report of the national executive committee’, to annual party conference, 7–9 Oct. 1922, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/01/05.

¹¹⁵ CPGB central executive committee, ‘Report on organisation’ (to the 6th CPGB congress, 17–19 May 1924), p. 10, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/01/06.

¹¹⁶ Minutes of ECCI presidium, 11 Oct. 1934, NMLH, CPGB microfilms, reel 25.

to be a major problem, to the extent that the party felt able to raise subscriptions to 4d per week in 1944.¹¹⁷

Victimization also played a part. Many people found that on joining the party they were identified as troublemakers by their employers, and so lost their jobs.¹¹⁸ This was especially a problem at times of high unemployment; on the other hand, shortages of skilled labour in the later 1930s did mean a greater degree of security for some, such as engineers, which perhaps explains their growing numerical importance in the party at that time and into the Second World War. Police harassment of Communists was also a feature of much of the period, particularly during the 1920s, and can hardly have encouraged those wavering about whether to stay in the party to remain members.¹¹⁹

One factor whose impact is more difficult to assess was the political line of the party. Inevitably, falling membership became a stick with which the Comintern, or sections of the leadership or rank-and-file, could beat party leaders. This was a tactic used by Pollitt and Dutt on the party commission, and by advocates of class against class from 1927 onwards. It appears to have been used, albeit more subtly, by Pollitt against the extreme left 'Young Turks' in 1930. Pollitt himself appears to have been in danger of falling victim to it even before he resigned as general secretary in October 1939. Rust's description of the 1937 membership figure of 12,500 as 'utterly inadequate' and due not to 'objective causes' but to 'weaknesses that we ourselves can overcome', and his expression of confidence that the level could reach 30,000 before too long, might well have been an attempt to pressurize or discredit Pollitt at a time when Rust would probably have known that Moscow was testing the water about replacing the general secretary.¹²⁰ How far the political line made a real difference to membership retention, however, is more difficult to say. It is true that the party did better during the popular front period, and between 1941 and 1945, than it did in the class against class period. But to attribute this to the political line alone, without regard to other factors such as the state of the economy, would be facile and simplistic. There were usually other reasons than the political line of the party for its failure to retain new recruits. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the persistent problems in this area gave ammunition to critics of the leadership, which they could use if the opportunity presented itself.

Overall, it seems that the nature of party recruiting did change over the period. The big enrolments of 1926 and 1931–2 were flimsy and shallow, based on very weak foundations, long seen by historians of religion as characteristic

¹¹⁷ Minutes of executive committee, 20 Aug. 1944, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/01/02.

¹¹⁸ CPGB organization department to ECCI, 'Statistics of the CPGB position in 1926', Oct. 1926, RC 495/100/364, fos. 114–17; minutes of central committee, 6–7 Mar. 1927, RC 495/100/417, fo. 439.

¹¹⁹ CPGB, 'Ninth congress', 8–10 Oct. 1927, p. 16, NMLH CP/CENT/CONG/02/02; H. McShane and J. Smith, *Harry McShane: no mean fighter* (London, 1978), p. 211.

¹²⁰ CPGB, *It can be done*, p. 163; R. P. Dutt, 'The British Communist party', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 May 1966.

of the type of recruitment accompanying religious revivals. As one such historian has written, ‘popular revivalism functioned as a form of socio-economic protest or “theatre” in times of social and economic dislocation’.¹²¹ So it was with the CPGB in its early years: people would join it as an almost visceral reaction to crisis, or inspired by a rousing speech from a party leader,¹²² but soon fell away, as they had, for example, from the churches after the great Welsh religious revival of 1904–5.¹²³ During the 1930s, however, this began to change. The party’s turn to work within the trade unions, and hence the involvement of Communists in the day-to-day concerns of many workers, did begin to bring in recruits whose allegiance was rather more solid (although still, to some extent, subject to fluctuation). This meant that the greatest ‘revival’ of all – the massive recruitment during the Second World War, largely in support of the USSR’s efforts against Nazi Germany – did not result in the kind of disruption that the recruitment of 1926 had ultimately brought.

VI

During the interwar period the CPGB suffered from a low membership; for much of the period the figure was very low indeed. Not only that; its membership was also heavily skewed, for much of the time, in particular directions. In terms of gender, age, class, industry, and location, it was a long way from reflecting the population as a whole. Even though overwhelmingly working class, it was very different from that class taken in the round. In addition, and crucially according to the lights of the party and the Comintern, the party lacked economic leverage for much of the period. It was a bitter irony that a movement so concerned with the politics of production should have had so little leverage at the workplace for much of the period. Finally, low membership meant great reliance on the Comintern for funding for much of the period, although the precise impact of this upon the party’s general behaviour is more complex than a simple model of patron–client relations will allow.

Nevertheless, by 1945 there were signs of clear improvement. Overall membership, although it had fallen back some way from the wartime peak, was still more than double the highest pre-war levels. While many wartime recruits were already leaving, the party’s recruitment was, at root, less ‘revivalistic’, and so more solidly based, than in the 1920s and early 1930s, which meant that membership would not fall back to pre-war levels until the 1980s. The party had more economic leverage than ever before, helped greatly by the full employment that war had brought. It was still overwhelmingly proletarian in make-up, but could at least claim more than a smattering of middle-class

¹²¹ D. Luker, ‘Revivalism in theory and practice: the case of Cornish Methodism’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 37 (1986), pp. 603–19, at p. 619.

¹²² E. Benson, *To struggle is to live: a working-class autobiography* (2 vols., Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1979), I, p. 191.

¹²³ B. Hall, ‘The Welsh revival of 1904–5: a critique’, *Studies in Church History*, 8 (1972), pp. 291–301, at p. 300.

support. Similarly, it was still predominantly male, but it had at least begun to appeal to wider numbers of women, and had seen that there was at least some potential in housewives and the politics of consumption. And although its members were still heavily concentrated in the party's old areas of relative strength, its geographical spread was now better than before the war, as witnessed by the running of candidates at the 1945 general election in such ostensibly unlikely locations as Harrow East, Abingdon, and Sevenoaks. By then, the CPGB had at last become an organic, if relatively minor, player in British politics. It was an achievement which was to have a legacy well into the 1970s, until the party began to move towards the final death-throes which culminated in the nemesis of Communism in the latter part of the following decade.

Two further points can be made. The first is that the high level of turnover in party membership meant that many more people had been members of it at some point than were ever members at any one time. Some of those leaving, it is true, became anti-Communists, in some cases passionately so. But the fact that most appear to have left for essentially non-political reasons does suggest that, over time, the party did become increasingly well known, and this, in turn, helped the party to sustain or even increase its wider influence. The second point is that the party's membership patterns displayed significant parallels, not only with other Western Communist parties, but also with the SDF and BSP which had preceded it. The latter organizations had also suffered from many of the problems outlined in this article, like a membership heavily skewed in terms of location and gender, and high turnover.¹²⁴ This, in turn, would suggest that the CPGB displayed characteristics both of international Communism and long-term weaknesses and traditions on the British far left. In this, as in so many other respects, the CPGB was neither an alien organization imported from Moscow, nor a party totally rooted in national radical traditions, but, rather, a curious hybrid of the two.

¹²⁴ M. Crick, *The history of the Social-Democratic Federation* (Keele, 1994), pp. 154, 226–9.