5 The Late Twenties and Early Thirties

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORKERS’ DREADNOUGHT

After the issue dated 14 June 1924, the Workers’ Dreadnought ceased to appear. For several years this weekly newspaper had kept its readers in touch with worldwide political developments and had published the views of the most radical international communist groups. In July 1921, after Sylvia Pankhurst had been censured by the CPGB for publicly criticising the conduct of party members belonging to the Poplar Board of Guardians, she defended her actions by arguing that ‘only by criticism and discussion can a knowledge and understanding of Communist tactics be hammered out by the Communist Party and communicated to the masses’. It was in this same spirit that after Pankhurst’s expulsion from the CPGB the Dreadnought continued to publish information, analyses and debates about which most workers would have remained unaware had they relied on the pro-Comintern publications for enlightenment. At the same time the Dreadnought group’s political views were thoroughly radicalised by the impact of the political events that it reported, and by its contacts with revolutionary groups in other countries. In short, during the period of its greatest intellectual vitality and creativity the Dreadnought group was alive to, and sustained by, the controversies of the international communist movement and an unprecedentedly high level of class struggle. The disappearance of the Workers’ Dreadnought was, therefore, both a sign and a consequence of the ebbing of the great wave of radical actions and ideas which swept over most of Europe after the 1917 Russian revolution.

By 1921 most revolutionaries had reluctantly begun to acknowledge that their confident expectations of widespread revolutions, fuelled by 1917 and its aftermath, were not going to be fulfilled in the immediate future after all. When the Glasgow Communist Group brought out the first (and only) issue of the Red Commune in February 1921, for example, it remarked: ‘Some will think that we could not have chosen a more inopportune moment. . . . Unemploy-
ment is spreading throughout the country. Misery, sorrow, poverty, inability to sustain the propaganda exists everywhere. The Communist movement is divided into factions and fractions. During the same month the Workers’ Dreadnought made a similarly pessimistic assessment of the situation when it warned that ‘it would be folly to pretend that the hour is fully revolutionary’. Nor were the British anti-parliamentarians’ comrades abroad any more sanguine. In the summer of 1922 the Russian anti-parliamentarians expressed the view that ‘the situation of the Proletariat throughout the world is at present an extremely difficult one’, while the KAPD at its Fifth Special Conference also concluded that ‘the revolution for the time being is at a standstill’.

The fading prospects of revolution naturally caused a steady haemorrhage of members from the anti-parliamentary communist groups in Britain. In the first six months of its existence (that is, between June and December 1920) the CB(BSTI) had attracted a membership of around 600, organised in more than 30 separate branches, two-thirds of them located outside London. When the Dreadnought group tried to set up the Communist Workers’ Party in February 1922, however, it managed to established only three branches outside London, in Sheffield, Plymouth and Portsmouth. This illustrates the drastic loss of support suffered by the Dreadnought group in the space of less than two years.

The anti-parliamentarians aligned with Guy Aldred and the Spur were similarly few in number. When the Glasgow Communist Group’s headquarters were raided following the publication of the ‘seditious’ Red Commune in February 1921, the police ‘took possession of 51 membership cards, some bearing the name of Glasgow Anarchist Group and some Glasgow Communist Group’ (the two groups had united at the end of 1916). This figure ties in with John McGovern’s recollection that in 1921 ‘a number of us in Shettleston formed a branch of the Anti-Parliamentary Communist Federation . . . We started off with between fifty and sixty members’. From the outset the APCF’s strength lay where it would always reside: in Glasgow and the surrounding areas. However, it would not be unreasonable to reckon that the APCF, like the Dreadnought group, also suffered a steady loss of membership after the start of the 1920s.

When the Workers’ Dreadnought ceased to appear after mid-1924, therefore, it was because Sylvia Pankhurst and her comrades had finally succumbed to the intense pressures imposed by trying to sustain communist propaganda during a period in which their efforts