

**Confronting the Challenge of Socialism:  
The British Empire Union and the National Citizens'  
Union, 1917-1927.**

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## **Abstract of Thesis.**

This thesis discusses two important anti-socialist organisations which have received little attention from historians: the British Empire Union (BEU) and the National Citizens' Union (NCU). It assesses the ideology, activity and impact of these bodies between 1917 and 1927. Difficulties arise in this task due to the absence in the archives of substantial amounts of manuscript evidence such as minute books and correspondence. The history of these organisations has, therefore, been reconstructed primarily from contemporary published sources. This material allows us to develop a picture of these organisations which reveals a close affinity with mainstream Conservatism both in terms of ideology and personnel. This contradicts to an extent the impression given in the relatively thin treatment of these organisations in the historiography, which tends to focus on their alleged extremism. The thesis shows that the BEU and the NCU embodied opinions which encompassed a range of political positions, ranging from support for the Liberal-led post-war Coalition as a means of uniting all those 'Constitutionalist' forces opposed to socialism, to calls for the setting up of an 'English Fascisti' to emulate Mussolini's example in Italy and physically destroy the socialist movement in Britain.

The thesis examines the role of the BEU in combating the alleged menace of 'British Bolshevism'. It assesses the importance of the NCU in the events leading to the collapse of the Coalition government in October 1922; and its role in strikebreaking. It looks at how both organisations had a part in the development of Conservative strategies for defeating the electoral challenge of the Labour Party. It assesses the relationship between the British anti-socialist right and fascism as it was understood in the 1920s.

The thesis concludes that the two organisations under discussion were relatively influential inside the Conservative Party, particularly among backbench MPs and party activists; they were important catalysts in the development of anti-socialist alliances in municipal elections, which arguably influenced Conservative strategies in parliamentary contests; and they were able to divert potentially ‘fascist’ energies and obsessions into the respectable, mainstream political discourse of British Conservatism. Ironically the Conservative Party's openness to anti-socialism contributed significantly to the marginalisation of the BEU and the NCU, as did the weakness of the revolutionary socialist threat in Britain, particularly after the failure of the General Strike in May 1926.

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## Introduction.

This thesis is concerned with right-wing anti-socialist organisations in Britain between 1917 and 1927. It focuses on two important bodies which have received little attention from historians: the British Empire Union (BEU) and the National Citizens' Union (NCU). Although both of these organisations claimed to be 'non-political' in character, they in fact had quite intimate connections in terms of personnel and outlook with the Conservative Party. Ironically the Conservative Party's openness to anti-socialism contributed to the marginalisation of the BEU and NCU, particularly after the failure of the General Strike in 1926. Alongside the substantial practical difficulties in reconstructing the activities of anti-socialist organisations of the period, this subsequent marginalisation has led historians to make a superficial assessment of their impact. This has tended to focus on their allegedly extremist and fascist tendencies and to underestimate their close affinity with mainstream Conservatism.

The two organisations with which we are centrally concerned were launched a few years apart. Initially, each body had different primary objectives, signified by their original titles. The British Empire Union originated as the Anti-German Union (AGU) in April 1915. Founded by a Scottish baronet, Sir George Makgill, its declared mission was 'to root out the German Canker which has eaten its way deep into our national life'. It received support from a number of Conservative peers and MPs, as well as right-wing publicists like Leopold Maxse, editor of the *National Review*.<sup>1</sup> A year after its foundation the AGU was renamed as the British Empire Union. Makgill pointed out that while the organisation's 'objects and policy remain[ed] the same', the new title better-emphasised

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, 18 June 1915; 21 February 1916.

the ‘constructive side’ of the Union’s work, which was ‘to foster imperial ideals’.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, Germanophobia persisted as the organisation’s dominant theme until 1918. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of Autumn 1917, however, the BEU focus shifted to the perceived threat posed by socialism and trade union militancy. In the 1920s the BEU became the leading anti-communist body on the British right.

While the BEU’s initial focus was on winning the war and defending the empire, the launch of the NCU was predicated primarily on concern over domestic issues. The organisation began life as the Middle Classes Union (MCU), founded in March 1919 by a number of Conservative MPs and businessmen, including William Kennedy Jones, MP for Hornsey, a former editor of the *Globe* newspaper, and Major John Pretymann Newman, MP for Finchley. Its president was Sir George Askwith, former government Chief Industrial Commissioner, who became Baron Askwith later that year. The organisation was formed to ‘withstand the rapacity of the manual worker and the profiteer’; and was committed to the militant defence of middle-class interests.<sup>3</sup> A major plank of its platform was opposition to working-class unrest and socialism; and it became known for recruiting volunteer labour to ‘maintain essential services’ during strikes. In January 1922 the organisation was renamed the National Citizens’ Union;<sup>4</sup> and a year later the defeat of communism was declared to be its primary objective.<sup>5</sup> The BEU and the NCU were the most prominent of a number of British anti-Bolshevist propaganda societies which proliferated in the aftermath of the Great War. Despite their initial

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<sup>2</sup> *New Age*, 4 May 1916, p. 22; *Manchester Guardian*, 22 March 1916; BEU, ‘Aims and Objects’, typed sheet (n.d. [1917]), Cumbria Record Office (Whitehaven), DWM 7/86.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 4 March 1919.

<sup>4</sup> *The Times*, 19 December 1921.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 14 December 1922.

specialisms both bodies came to share a commitment to combating socialism by the early 1920s; a commitment which became their defining credo as the decade progressed.

In contrast to some smaller or more ephemeral right-wing bodies of the time, like the Britons, the National Party, and the various 'fascist' sects of the 1920s, very little has been written by historians about the BEU and the NCU. The three standard works on the British right covering this period contain only fleeting references to them.<sup>6</sup> The wartime activities of the BEU have been described in more detail by Panikos Panayi.<sup>7</sup> Its trajectory after 1918, however, has elicited only brief mentions in broader studies, most notably those of Robert Benewick, Kenneth Brown, and Stephen White;<sup>8</sup> and a short research paper by Roy Bean exposing the undercover work of the organisation in the North West of England.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the NCU even less secondary material exists. Benewick and White give the NCU some attention;<sup>10</sup> while its forerunner, the MCU, is referred to in a number of more general studies of inter-war Britain, though again not in any detail.<sup>11</sup> Sam Davies' and Bob Morley's ongoing collection dealing with county

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<sup>6</sup> G. C. Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right 1918-1939*, Croom Helm, London (1986), pp. 17, 145, 156-7; B. Farr, *The Development and Impact of Right-Wing Politics in Britain, 1903-1932*, Garland, New York (1987), pp. 59, 63; A. Sykes, *The Radical Right in Britain: Social Imperialism to the BNP*, Palgrave, London (2005), p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> P. Panayi, 'The British Empire Union in the First World War', in T. Kushner and K. Lunn (eds.), *The Politics of Marginality*, Frank Cass, London (1990), pp. 113-128.

<sup>8</sup> R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, Allan Lane, London (1972), pp. 39-40; K. D. Brown, 'The Anti-Socialist Union, 1908-49', in idem. (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History*, Macmillan, London (1974), pp. 255-6; S. White, 'Ideological Hegemony and Political Control: The Sociology of Anti-Bolshevism in Britain 1918-20', *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, No. 9 (May 1975), pp. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> R. Bean, 'Liverpool Shipping Employers and the Anti-Bolshevik Activities of J. M. Hughes', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, No. 34 (Spring 1977), pp. 22-6.

<sup>10</sup> Benewick, pp. 40-1; White, pp. 12-14.

<sup>11</sup> M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour 1920-1924: The Beginning of Modern British Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1971), pp. 64-5, 74-5; B. Waites, 'The Language and Imagery of Class in Early Twentieth-Century England', *Literature and History*, No. 4 (Autumn 1976), p. 36; idem, *A Class Society at War: England 1914-18*, Berg, Leamington Spa (1987), pp. 26, 53-4; T. Jeffery and K. McClelland, 'A World Fit to Live in: The *Daily Mail* and the Middle Classes 1918-39', in J. Curran, A. Smith and P. Wingate (eds.), *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century*, Routledge, London (1987), p. 44.

borough elections, and Steven Woodbridge's short article on the NCU in Richmond, are the only other modern published sources of note. Both deal with the organisation's significant contribution to municipal politics.<sup>12</sup> Finally, both organisations are referred to in Mike Hughes' study of the Economic League and in the work of John Hope, which deals with the relationship between anti-socialist organisations and the British secret state.<sup>13</sup>

The relatively thin treatment of these organisations in some of this secondary material has, on occasion, led to a number of basic misunderstandings about their past. Some of these are relatively trivial matters, such as the common misnaming of the Middle Classes Union as the Middle *Class* Union. More seriously, the longevity and influence of these organisations is often misconstrued. David Baker, for instance, describes the BEU and the NCU as 'short-lived', when in fact they existed for relatively long periods compared to other contemporary right-wing bodies.<sup>14</sup> The MCU/NCU began life in 1919. It disintegrated during the early stages of World War II, amid allegations of pro-Nazism, though it was still referred to in the press as late as August 1942.<sup>15</sup> An

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<sup>12</sup> S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Elections in England and Wales, 1919-1938: A Comparative Analysis*, 3 Vols., Ashgate, Aldershot (1999; 2000; 2006), passim; S. Woodbridge, 'The National Citizens' Union in Richmond: A Brief History', *Richmond History*, No. 27 (May 2006), pp. 85-7.

<sup>13</sup> J. Hope, 'Fascism, the Security Service and the Curious Careers of Maxwell Knight and James McGuirk Hughes', *Lobster*, No. 22 (November 1991), pp. 1-5; idem, 'British fascism and the state 1917-1927: a re-examination of the documentary evidence', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Winter 1992); pp. 72-83; idem, 'Fascism and the State: The Case of the British Fascists', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1993), pp. 367-80; idem, 'Surveillance or Collusion? Maxwell Knight, MI5 and the British Fascists', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 1994), pp. 651-75; M. Hughes, *Spies at Work*, 1 in 12, Bradford (1995).

<sup>14</sup> D. Baker, 'The Extreme Right in the 1920s: Fascism in a Cold Climate, or "Conservatism with Knobs on"?' in M. Cronin (ed.), *The Failure of British Fascism: The Far Right and the Fight for Political Recognition*, Macmillan, London (1996), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> R. M. Douglas, *Feminist Freikorps: The British Women Police, 1914-1940*, Praeger, London (1999), pp. 126-7; C. Holmes, *Anti-Semitism in British Society 1876-1939*, Edward Arnold, London (1979), pp. 201-2; *The Times*, 17 August 1942.



attempt to revive the organisation under its original title was made after the war;<sup>16</sup> and its final demise only came in the mid-1950s.<sup>17</sup> The BEU existed from 1915 until at least 1975, initially as the AGU, and after 1960 as the British Commonwealth Union (BCU).<sup>18</sup> This later change of name has sown confusion, due to the existence of an earlier BCU, led by Sir Patrick Hannon, which eventually evolved into the Empire Industries Association. Webber, for instance, suggests that the earlier BCU and the BEU were the same organisation, when in fact they were entirely separate bodies, though with very similar ideological underpinnings.<sup>19</sup> Such mistakes have been repeated and compounded in subsequent studies.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, historians researching a particular organisation cannot be expected to know the minutiae of every other body existing contemporaneously. Similarly, historians writing on general themes might be forgiven for misnaming the Middle Classes Union as the Middle Class Union, particularly as the same mistake was often made by contemporaries. However, more serious problems may arise when analyses take for granted the interpretations of other authors without seeking verification from reliable contemporary source materials.

Unfortunately, in the case of both the BEU and the NCU the amount of such reliable material is severely limited, due to the apparent unavailability of items like minute books, correspondence and other papers generated by the organisations. This presents a major obstacle to anybody wishing to research these bodies in any depth; and is a possible reason why no major study has been undertaken on this theme. The present

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<sup>16</sup> *Manchester Guardian* 21 December 1949.

<sup>17</sup> *London Gazette*, 24 September 1954, 21 January 1955.

<sup>18</sup> Panayi, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Webber, p. 145; J. A. Turner, 'The British Commonwealth Union and the general election of 1918', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 368 (July 1978).

<sup>20</sup> Baker, p. 18; P. Barberis, J. McHugh, and M. Tyldesley, *Encyclopaedia of British and Irish Political Organisations: Parties, Groups and Movements of the Twentieth Century*, Pinter, London (2003), pp. 242, 1124.

author has made numerous enquiries into the whereabouts of such material. Unfortunately, in common with the experience of a number of other historians of British anti-socialist organisations, this search has been unsuccessful. As we shall see, however, this has not meant that a substantial study cannot be undertaken.

There is no doubt that in the case of the BEU/BCU an archive was accessible to researchers at its London office until the mid-1970s. Chris Cook's 1975 publication, *Sources in British Political History 1900-1951*, contains a description of its contents.<sup>21</sup> When Panayi was researching the early history of the BEU in the 1980s, however, his requests to view unpublished material were met with obstructionism, suggesting that sometime after 1975 the collection was removed from the public domain.<sup>22</sup> Current databases such as the National Register of Archives and the Database of Archives of Non-Governmental Organisations have no information on this material beyond Cook's description. Correspondence with major repositories including the British Library, the Bodleian Library, the National Archives, the Modern Records Centre, the Royal Commonwealth Society, and various university libraries has neither unearthed this material nor shed significant light on its fate.

In the case of the MCU/NCU the trail is colder still. James Peters and David Jarvis were unable to locate archival material relating to this body during their research in the 1980s and early 90s.<sup>23</sup> John Hope, who has searched exhaustively for the papers of both organisations, speculates that the records of the NCU may have been destroyed during the 1940s after the organisation was discredited by its association with British pro-

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<sup>21</sup> C. Cook, *Sources in British Political History 1900-1951, Vol. 1: A Guide to the Archives of Selected Organisations and Societies*, Macmillan, London (1975), p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> Email correspondence with P. Panayi, 23 May 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence with J. Peters, 5 March 2008; and D. Jarvis, 7-10 March 2008.

Nazi elements.<sup>24</sup> Another possibility is that this material – and possibly the BEU archive too – was taken into the possession of the Economic League (EL). The activities of various anti-socialist bodies, including the BEU, the NCU, and the Anti-Socialist and Anti-Communist Union (ASU), were co-ordinated in the 1920s and 30s by this organisation. Brown states that the ‘financial and literary assets’ of the ASU were lodged with the EL after it disbanded in 1949.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, the archives of the notoriously secretive EL have also long been unavailable to researchers. Arthur McIvor was refused access when he researched the organisation in the 1980s, amid claims that many of its older records had been destroyed during World War II.<sup>26</sup> Attempts by other authors, including Ewen Green, John Mason, and James Peters to locate ASU material have proved similarly fruitless.<sup>27</sup> The consensus of opinion among the historians and archivists consulted by the present author is that much of the manuscript record of inter-war British anti-socialism has been destroyed, misplaced, or deliberately withheld from scrutiny; with most suspecting the former.

The methodology of this research has undoubtedly been affected by this lack of unpublished archival material. Of necessity, it has been forced to rely upon the publications of the BEU and NCU, and those of their supporters. It has also drawn on the publications of their opponents, as well as other relevant contemporary press and periodical literature. Fortunately, much of the anti-socialist material consulted – in particular the BEU’s *Annual Report*, and the BEU and NCU periodicals: the *British Empire Union Monthly Record* (subsequently the *Empire Record*), and the *New Voice*

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<sup>24</sup> Telephone conversation with J. Hope, 10 March 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Brown, p. 257.

<sup>26</sup> A. McIvor, “‘A Crusade for Capitalism’: The Economic League, 1919-39”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (October 1988), pp. 654-5, n. 59; conversation with A. McIvor, 6 May 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Email correspondence with J. Peters, 5 March 2008.

(subsequently the *National Citizen*) – provides a fascinating and relatively comprehensive description, from their own standpoint, of the trajectory and significance of these organisations. These sources have been under-utilised by historians. Arguably, an analysis of their content is crucial to understanding British anti-socialism in the 1920s.

This thesis understands the forces of the political right at the heart of this study primarily as part of an *anti-labour* movement, which attempted to keep working-class aspirations within the constraints of bourgeois political hegemony, based upon capitalist economic relations. In Britain class struggles not only conditioned the evolution of the modern labour movement, but also coloured the development of those forces *opposed* to labour. As Larry Witherell has pointed out:

the political maturation of the labour movement did not occur in a vacuum. There were equally aggressive forces at work as a direct result of that maturation...it must be recognised that the right was equally responsible for the development of class politics.<sup>28</sup>

In the context of twentieth-century British history, left-leaning historians generally have focused on the Labour Party, the Communist Party and the trade unions. Quantitatively, the amount of literature from this perspective dealing with the British right is relatively low. What does exist tends to focus on the fascist extreme; and occasionally exhibits a tendency towards a conspiratorial explanation of events which can be unhelpful. The much larger phenomenon of right-wing anti-socialism has received less

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<sup>28</sup> L. L. Witherell, 'Anti-labourism and the British radical right, 1900-1940' (book review), *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Winter 1988), p. 59.

attention. The only major exception is the literature examining the role of business associations in ‘moderating’ the aspirations of labour;<sup>29</sup> and the historiography of the Conservative Party itself, which although traditionally dominated by studies implicitly sympathetic to their subject,<sup>30</sup> also contains an important body of work which focuses on the anti-labour aspect of Conservative politics.<sup>31</sup>

Whilst recognising these exceptions, Witherell’s contention that anti-labourism has been a neglected theme remains convincing:

Anti-labourism provides a thread of continuity detectable within the evolution of the radical right’s ideology and activism and, yet, it begs for cultivation. Notwithstanding such an inviting theme, there remains a dearth of scholarship upon the link between anti-labourism and the British radical right and their influence upon political behaviour...[in]...inter-war Britain.<sup>32</sup>

What follows is an attempt to contribute to that still-necessary process of cultivation.

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<sup>29</sup> Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History*, Macmillan, London (1974); A. McIvor, ‘Political Blacklisting and Anti-socialist Activity Between the Wars’, *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, Vol. 53, No. 1, Spring 1988; idem, “‘A Crusade for Capitalism’...’.

<sup>30</sup> Implicit sympathy for the Conservatives does not preclude analysis which focuses on the party’s anti-labourism, however, as Cowling’s *The Impact of Labour* clearly shows.

<sup>31</sup> E. H. H. Green, *The Crisis of Conservatism: The Politics, Economics and Ideology of the British Conservative Party, 1880-1914*, Routledge, London (1995); idem, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2002); D. Jarvis, Stanley Baldwin and the ideology of the Conservative response to socialism, PhD thesis, University of Lancaster (1991); idem, ‘British Conservatism and Class Politics in the 1920s’, *English Historical Review* (February 1996); idem, ‘The shaping of Conservative electoral hegemony, 1918-39’, in J. Lawrence and M. Taylor (eds.), *Party, State and Society: Electoral Behaviour in Britain since 1820*, Scolar Press, Aldershot (1997); R. McKibbin, ‘Class and Conventional Wisdom: The Conservative Party and the “Public” in Inter-war Britain’, in R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950*, Clarendon, Oxford (1990).

<sup>32</sup> Witherell, p. 56.

## Chapter 1.

### The British Empire Union: Bolshevism on the Brain.

In 1917 the words ‘Bolshevist’ and ‘Bolshevism’ were new additions to the lexicon of British politics. From early 1918 onwards, however, the notion of Bolshevism became ingrained into the psyche of every Briton with a modicum of political awareness. In the decade which followed, anti-socialist agitation in Britain ‘reached a zenith of activity’, and opposition to ‘British Bolshevism’ became a priority for many right-wing organisations.<sup>33</sup> Between 1918 and 1920 a remarkable number of anti-Bolshevist propaganda societies were active, some evolving from pre-existing patriotic and anti-socialist organisations, and others created specifically to counter the perceived new menace. Many of these bodies were ephemeral, small, and marginal. The British Empire Union was larger and more significant and forms the subject of this chapter. By 1921 it had eclipsed most of the other anti-Bolshevist societies. The most important exceptions were the Middle Classes Union/National Citizens’ Union, which will be dealt with in Chapter 2, and the National Propaganda Committee, a secret anti-subversive body, which had evolved out of the anti-socialist employers’ organisation, the British Commonwealth Union in 1919, and later took on a slightly more public guise as the Economic League (EL).<sup>34</sup> National Propaganda/EL played an important co-ordinating role on the anti-socialist right and has rightly received attention from a number of historians. It will, therefore, not feature heavily in this discussion. The BEU, the NCU, and other bodies

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<sup>33</sup> Farr, *The Development and Impact...*, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> J. Hope, ‘Surveillance or Collusion? Maxwell Knight, MI5 and the British Fascisti’, *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (October 1994), p. 660; NA CAB 27/84.

including the Anti-Socialist Union (ASU), co-operated under its umbrella to some extent, though each retained a significant level of autonomy.

During the period of acute industrial unrest in 1918-20 it appeared to some that the nightmare scenario of a British revolution was indeed manifesting itself.<sup>35</sup> Webber has pointed to the disconcerting manner in which the Bolshevik Revolution gave contemporaries 'a terrifying vision of the fate that could befall the United Kingdom if discontented workers at home or rebellious nationalists in the colonies were somehow to gain the upper hand'.<sup>36</sup> Scholars have tended to downplay the severity and significance of this post-war crisis in British history.<sup>37</sup> Some have pointed out the weakness of the revolutionary challenge in these years, suggesting that the contemporary British Marxist left was 'no more a threat to the established order than were the Jehovah's Witnesses to the established church or the Mormons to the institution of marriage'.<sup>38</sup> While such a view is understandable, given the relatively minor impact of the far left in Britain throughout the twentieth century, it understates the level of concern among contemporary anti-socialists, who perceived the threat from the revolutionary left as very real and very worrying. The right-wing author and activist, Nesta Webster, for instance, stated that in 1919 'England was faced by as great a danger as in 1914, and a danger of a more insidious kind', for at the very moment of her great victory 'a wave of revolution broke all over England...a new era of strife began; the very air was charged with violence'.<sup>39</sup> That such fears were not confined to the vivid imagination of the 'grand dame of British

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<sup>35</sup> White, 'Ideological Hegemony and Political Control...', p. 3; J. St Loe Strachey, 'The Mechanism of Revolution', *Nineteenth Century and After*, Vol. 88, No. 524 (October 1920), p. 582.

<sup>36</sup> Webber, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> D. Mitchell, 'Ghost of a Chance: British Revolutionaries in 1919', *History Today*, Vol. 20, No. 11 (November 1970), pp. 753-761.

<sup>38</sup> M. Kitchen, *Europe Between the Wars: A Political History*, Longman, London (1988), p. 187.

<sup>39</sup> N. H. Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, third edition, Boswell, London (1931), p. 85.

conspiracy theory' is evident in the remarkable number of organisations active between 1918 and 1921 whose stated objective was to counter the threat from 'British Bolshevism'.

Some of these bodies predated the Great War, the oldest being the Primrose League, which had existed since the 1880s. Throughout its existence it had expressed antipathy towards socialism and it was only natural that it would set its face against Bolshevism after 1917.<sup>40</sup> Other long-established anti-socialist organisations which donned the anti-Bolshevist mantle were the British Constitutional Association and the Liberty and Property Defence League.<sup>41</sup> The most outspoken of these older bodies was the Anti-Socialist Union, originally formed in 1908.<sup>42</sup> During the later stages of the war the ASU remodelled itself as the Reconstruction Society.<sup>43</sup> Despite the change of name the organisation continued to employ the kind of negative anti-socialist scaremongering which Brown describes as the mainstay of its pre-war propaganda.<sup>44</sup> A speciality of the Reconstruction Society was the promulgation of vicarious and often inaccurate accounts of the horrors of life in revolutionary Russia.<sup>45</sup> In late 1918, to commemorate the first anniversary of the revolution, it reprinted approvingly a *Daily Express* article which described Bolshevism as a 'ruthless...red war against property and the institutions of the State. It is the deliberate attempt to reach the millennium, by way of destruction, rapine,

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<sup>40</sup> *The Times*, 2 February 1920; M. Hendley, 'Anti-Alienism and the Primrose League: The Externalization of the Postwar Crisis in Great Britain 1918-32', *Albion*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer 2001), pp.255-7.

<sup>41</sup> Independent Labour Party (Information Committee), *Who Pays for the Attacks on Labour? An exposure of the Blackleg Organisations and Propaganda Agencies of Big Capital*, London (n. d. [1920]), p. 9; White, p. 8

<sup>42</sup> Brown, pp. 234-61; F. Coetzee, *For Party and Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1990), pp. 155-9.

<sup>43</sup> *Scotsman*, 29 April 1918.

<sup>44</sup> Brown, pp. 247, 252.

<sup>45</sup> ILP, *Who Pays...*, p. 4; Brown, pp. 252-3; White, p. 8.



and assassination'.<sup>46</sup> Another Reconstruction Society leaflet concluded 'if you want...to see the cost of living rise to forty times its pre-war cost, and the shops empty of food, and the children crying for bread that you cannot get them...and scores of people murdered daily in the streets, then, by all means become a Bolshevik'.<sup>47</sup> In 1919 the organisation turned its attention to the Bolsheviks' alleged imposition of 'Free Love' on the Russian people, declaring that under Bolshevism 'the position of a woman seems to be little different from that occupied by a breeding animal on a stud farm', while the 'children who are the issue of these unions are to become the property of the State'.<sup>48</sup> A later leaflet reiterated this, suggesting that the Bolshevik 'Nationalisation of Girls' had resulted in child abduction, rape, suicide and murder.<sup>49</sup> This particular piece of disinformation was relatively easily discredited, and much was made of this by the left.<sup>50</sup> Even Scotland Yard's uncompromisingly anti-Bolshevist Director of Intelligence, Basil Thomson, was forced to admit that 'some harm' had been done to the anti-Bolshevist cause by the widespread circulation of the statement.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to these older bodies a number of important patriotic organisations formed during the war became concerned about Bolshevism. These included the National Party,<sup>52</sup> the British Commonwealth Union (BCU),<sup>53</sup> and the 'patriotic Labour'

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<sup>46</sup> Reconstruction Society, *What Bolshevism Really Means*, No. 4, New Series (n. d. [1918]).

<sup>47</sup> Reconstruction Society, *Why Not Become a Bolshevik?*, No. 5, New Series (n. d. [1918]).

<sup>48</sup> Reconstruction Society, *The Bolshevik in Relation to Women and Children*, No. 10, New Series (n. d. [1919]).

<sup>49</sup> Reconstruction Society, *Bolsheviks and the Nationalisation of Girls*, No. 29, New Series (n. d. [1919]).

<sup>50</sup> ILP, *Who Pays...*, p. 4.

<sup>51</sup> NA CAB/24/78/390.

<sup>52</sup> Farr, pp. 34-42; W. D. Rubinstein, 'Henry Page Croft and the National Party 1917-22', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (January 1974), pp. 129-48; C. Wrigley, "'In the Excess Of Their Patriotism": The National Party and Threats of Subversion', in C. Wrigley (ed.), *Warfare, Diplomacy and Politics: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor*, Hamish Hamilton, London (1986), pp. 93-119.

<sup>53</sup> Turner, 'The British Commonwealth Union...'; Farr, pp. 43-52; T. Rogers, 'Sir Allan Smith, the Industrial Group and the Politics of Unemployment, 1919-1924', *Business History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (January 1986).

organisation, the British Workers' League (BWL), subsequently the National Democratic Party (NDP).<sup>54</sup> 1919-20 also witnessed the creation of a large number of new, specifically anti-Bolshevist, groupings. Such bodies generally had a brief spurt of life in the panicky two and a half years or so after the Bolshevik Revolution, before fading into obscurity or being absorbed by bigger or more effective organisations like the BEU and National Propaganda. White's brief but invaluable study is the standard work on such bodies,<sup>55</sup> which included, among others, the National Security Union,<sup>56</sup> the Liberty League,<sup>57</sup> the National Unity Movement and the People's Union for Democracy,<sup>58</sup> the Anti-Bolshevik League of Great Britain,<sup>59</sup> the Christian Counter-Bolshevik Crusade,<sup>60</sup> and the Welsh Democratic League.<sup>61</sup>

The British Empire Union had originated in 1915 (as the Anti-German Union) and worked closely with the other bodies formed during the war, attempting to disrupt pacifist and socialist meetings, often violently.<sup>62</sup> The BEU's antipathy to socialism grew more vociferous in the summer of 1917 when revolutionary events in Russia threatened to

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<sup>54</sup> J. O. Stubbs, 'Lord Milner and Patriotic Labour', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 87, No. 345, (October 1972), pp. 717-754; R. Douglas, 'The National Democratic Party and the British Workers' League', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September 1972), pp. 533-52; E. May, 'Charles Stanton and the limits to "patriotic" labour', *Welsh History Review*, 18 (1996/7), pp. 483-508

<sup>55</sup> White, 'Ideological Hegemony and Political Control...', pp. 3-20.

<sup>56</sup> *The Times*, 10 February 1919, 6 March 1919, 29 April 1919, 13 May 1919; *Scotsman*, 20 March 1919; NA CAB/24/76/376.

<sup>57</sup> D. S. Higgins (ed.), *The Private Diaries of Henry Rider Haggard 1914-1925*, Cassell, London (1980), pp. 163-197; *The Times* 3, 4 March 1920; *Scotsman* 4 March 1920.

<sup>58</sup> M. Ruotsila, *British and American Anticommunism before the Cold War*, Frank Cass, London (2001), p. 100; idem, 'Lord Sydenham of Combe's World Jewish Conspiracy', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (July 2000), p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> G. M. Edwards, *The Anti-Bolshevik Crusade*, G. M. Edwards, London (1920).

<sup>60</sup> *The Times*, 5 February, 16 August 1920.

<sup>61</sup> *The Times*, 17 February 1919.

<sup>62</sup> *The Times*, 7 Dec 1915; 11 January, 11 February 1916; NA HO 45/10810; BEU, *New Year, 1917*, (1917), p. 1, Cumbria Record Office (Whitehaven), DWM 7/86; B. Millman, 'The Battle of Cory Hall, November 1916: Patriots Meet Dissenters in Wartime Cardiff', *Canadian Journal of History*, XXXV (April 2000), pp. 73-5.

remove Britain's eastern ally from the conflict.<sup>63</sup> The Bolshevik Revolution turned that threat into reality, prompting the BEU to perceive a German 'hidden hand' behind Russian events, a direct attempt to undermine the Allied war effort.<sup>64</sup> The Bolsheviks were seen by their British opponents as either financially motivated German agents, or 'honest fanatics', unwittingly duped by the German High Command.<sup>65</sup> Panayi records the views of Captain Parsons, a BEU organiser, who, when comparing the anti-war Independent Labour Party with the Russian Communists, stated that 'he believed that the Germans controlled both groups'.<sup>66</sup> Panayi presents opposition to Bolshevism as only a developing theme in BEU propaganda at this time. Overshadowed by its Germanophobia and desire for a crushing victory in the war, BEU hostility to socialism only became a primary consideration in the 1920s.<sup>67</sup>

Anti-socialism had, however, long been intertwined with hostility to Germany in the ideology of the BEU.<sup>68</sup> This stemmed largely from the fact that the organisation was influenced by conspiracy theories linking socialism and pan-Germanism in an anti-Christian plot for world domination, financed by Jewish capitalists. The Bolshevik Revolution was subsequently held up as proof of this theory.<sup>69</sup> Following Germany's military defeat BEU propaganda increasingly targeted Bolshevism as the spearhead of this alleged world conspiracy. In 1921 a circular letter to prominent supporters of the

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<sup>63</sup> Panayi, p. 122.

<sup>64</sup> *British Empire Union Monthly Record* (hereafter *Monthly Record*), December 1918, p.8.

<sup>65</sup> C. Andrew, *Secret Service: The Making of the British Intelligence Community*, Heinemann, London (1985), p.224.

<sup>66</sup> Panayi, p. 123.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Sir George Makgill's article 'Britain in the Web of the Pro-German Spider', *Daily Express*, 9 November 1915.

<sup>69</sup> *The Times*, 16 May 1919.

BEU claimed that the Union had been 'fighting the spread of Bolshevism in this country for the past five years'.<sup>70</sup>

On 4 February 1919 the BEU placed an advertisement in the press appealing for funds to enable it to extend its campaign against Bolshevism, warning that 'immediate action is vital for the safety of our country'.<sup>71</sup> From April 1919 onwards the *Monthly Record* carried regular articles attacking the new regime in Russia under such headings as 'The Hell of Bolshevism', 'Boches and Bolsheviks', 'The Bolshevik Lie', 'Russia Under the Germans', 'The Bloody Hand of Bolshevism', and 'The Reign of Terror at Riga'. In July the magazine carried a cartoon depicting the Bolshevik 'Cobra of Confiscation'.<sup>72</sup> A number of these articles were reproduced as leaflets and pamphlets.<sup>73</sup>

The BEU organised numerous meetings in London on the issue of Bolshevism in 1919. On 18 May Sir Frederick Milner addressed a BEU gathering at the Criterion Theatre on the subject of 'Industrial Strife and Bolshevism'. He described Bolshevism as 'the negation of liberty, justice and humanity'. Those who supported it were 'utterly contemptible and utterly unworthy to be citizens of great liberty-loving England'. He believed that British socialists were being 'supplied with large funds to carry on Bolshevik propaganda', and called for a 'very careful investigation' into their source. He went on to state that 'If it were true that certain capitalists in this country were supplying money the sooner they were hunted out and hounded out the better', reflecting a conspiratorial frame of mind which regarded Jewish capitalists and socialist agitators as

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<sup>70</sup> Modern Records Centre, Warwick, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation papers, MSS.36/A24/2.

<sup>71</sup> *The Times*, 4 February 1919.

<sup>72</sup> *Monthly Record*, April 1919, p. 57; May 1919, p. 65; May 1919, p. 73; July 1919, p. 101; September 1919, p. 126; November 1919, p. 152; December 1919, pp. 1, 11.

<sup>73</sup> BEU, *The Hell of Bolshevism*, BEU No. 32, London (1919); BEU, *The Bolshevik Lie*, BEU No. 33, London (1919).

two sides of the same coin. At the same meeting Colonel Alan Burgoyne, Unionist MP for Kensington North, described Bolshevism as ‘a disease of the mentality’.<sup>74</sup> A week later, under the chairmanship of Lord Denbigh, a further BEU meeting was held at the same venue. It was addressed by Frank Souter, Deputy Chairman of the BEU Board of Management, and Clem Edwards, NDP MP for East Ham South, who spoke on ‘Bolshevism as an international danger’.<sup>75</sup> At the end of 1919 a series of BEU lectures on ‘Revolution or Industrial Peace?’ was held at the Wigmore Hall. These included the Fabian socialist and translator of Tolstoy’s works, Aylmer Maude, speaking on ‘Bolshevism’ on 19 November.<sup>76</sup>

As 1919 progressed BEU concerns began to shift to the threat posed by ‘British Bolshevism’. Articles in the *Monthly Record* pointed to linkages between the Bolsheviks, Sinn Fein and the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union; and claimed that Bolshevik agitators were stirring up trouble in South Wales and other industrial centres.<sup>77</sup> In order to counter this perceived threat the BEU determined to spread its anti-Bolshevist message beyond the capital and launched a series of propaganda campaigns in industrial areas, the most successful of which was a three-month caravan tour of Yorkshire.<sup>78</sup>

In early 1920 the BEU launched an appeal for £250,000 for its campaign against Bolshevism and industrial unrest. It emphasised that it was committed to concentrating its propaganda effort among the ‘vast body of British workers [who] are not revolutionary’.<sup>79</sup> This strategy involved the BEU promotion of ‘patriotic Labour’ figures

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<sup>74</sup> *Scotsman*, 19 May 1919.

<sup>75</sup> *The Times*, 15 May 1919.

<sup>76</sup> *Daily Express*, 17 November 1919; *The Times*, 7, 19 November 1919; *Monthly Record*, December 1919, p. 8.

<sup>77</sup> *Monthly Record*, June 1919, pp. 88-90; August 1919, p. 112; September 1919, p. 124.

<sup>78</sup> *Monthly Record*, September 1919, p. iii (inside back cover), November 1919, p. 155.

<sup>79</sup> *Monthly Record*, February 1919, p. 33; *The Times*, 31 January 1920.

like Clem Edwards; and an emphasis on exposing the allegedly revolutionary and extremist character of the official Labour leadership in BEU publications.<sup>80</sup> Meetings were held in industrial areas and in major towns and cities. In January 1920 the Edinburgh branch of the BEU launched its own campaign with a meeting entitled 'Bolshevism Exposed'. It was chaired by T. B. Morison, the Coalition Liberal MP for Inverness and Solicitor-General for Scotland, and was addressed by Edouard Luboff, editor of *The Russian* and a 'pioneer of...anti-German Bolshevism [sic] in Russia'.<sup>81</sup> On 28 January the branch held a further meeting on the subject of 'Insidious Bolshevism' at Drumsheugh Hall, during which the branch Organising Secretary, Miss Barbara Wylie, stated that Bolshevism was being spread 'by means of money and false doctrines' to achieve for Germany 'that victory which they were not able to obtain by the force of arms'.<sup>82</sup>

Public meetings and debates in London continued to form an important part of the BEU campaign in 1920. Some were addressed by high-ranking Conservative politicians, along with aristocratic Russian émigrés and British eyewitnesses of the 'Bolshevik tyranny'. On 30 January the Westminster branch hosted a lecture at the Caxton Hall by Reverend R. Courtier-Forster, entitled 'The Truth About Russia', at which the former British Chaplain at Odessa spent an hour pouring scorn on the 'monstrous "new civilisation" which the Bolsheviks had given to Russia', and highlighting the 'many instances of Bolshevik atrocities which he had personally seen'. There were numerous interventions from members of the audience during the course of the meeting, including 'outbursts' from W. T. Goode, of the *Manchester Guardian*, and from Colonel C.

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<sup>80</sup> *Monthly Record*, January 1920, p. 19.

<sup>81</sup> *Scotsman*, 20 December 1919, 15 January 1920.

<sup>82</sup> *Scotsman*, 29 January 1920.

Malone, the communist-supporting MP for Leyton East, who took offence at comments from both the main speaker and the chairman – BEU Secretary, Reginald Wilson – which appeared to cast doubt on Malone’s veracity as a witness to events in Russia, whilst endorsing fulsomely those of opponents of the regime.<sup>83</sup> James Adderley, an audience member who also queried the chairman’s apparent bias, later complained at being ‘howled down...as a lover of murder, free love, and atheism...[and]...set upon by some 20 ladies in the name of free speech, law, order, and Christianity’.<sup>84</sup>

On 20 February the BEU organised a public meeting at the Queen’s Hall at which personal reminiscences of life in Bolshevist Russia were related by Lydia Yavorska (Princess Bariatinsky), Miss May Healy, Rev. Courtier-Forster, Paul Dukes, John Pollock, Aylmer Maude and others. A. W. Gough, Prebendary of St. Paul’s Cathedral, opened the meeting, repeating the BEU mantra that while ‘real Labour’ was ‘sound, human and sincere’, the ‘voice that claimed to speak for Labour...was a voice that was working up a spirit alien to this country. All the cant about nationalisation was intended to prepare the way for Bolshevism’. To interruptions from a section of the audience, Bariatinsky stated that the Bolsheviks ‘were aiming at the destruction of all cultured life’. Miss Healy recommended, to loud cheers, that ‘those who had any illusions about the state of things in Russia should go out and live there’. A series of lantern slides illustrating alleged Bolshevik atrocities was shown by E. Luboff. The divided nature of the audience was again indicated when slides depicting Lenin and Trotsky were received with a mixture of hisses and applause.<sup>85</sup> On 22 March Viscount Curzon, the Foreign Secretary, presided at a further BEU meeting in London at which Bariatinsky described

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<sup>83</sup> *The Times*, 28, 31 January 1920.

<sup>84</sup> *The Times*, 2 February 1920.

<sup>85</sup> *The Times*, 21 Feb 1920.

Bolshevik commissars as ‘either murderers and thieves...or German agents’. She went on to warn the British government not to make peace with a regime which was working in the interests of ‘German militarism and German revenge’.<sup>86</sup> In April she was a speaker at a reception and meeting held at the London residence of Lady St Helier, during the course of which Reginald Wilson reassured his upper-class audience that the BEU was now ‘out to combat Bolshevism’ and proposed the setting up of ‘colleges for working men’ to counter Bolshevik propaganda.<sup>87</sup>

During the summer of 1920 the annual meeting of the BEU at the Cannon-Street Hotel was addressed by H. V. Keeling, a British journalist and trade unionist, who had been imprisoned by the Bolsheviks. He derided the qualified support given to the new regime in Russia by a British Labour Delegation, which had visited whilst he was still a prisoner, describing the ‘elaborate stage management of the visit’ by the Bolshevik hosts, and the entirely misleading impression figures like George Lansbury had imparted to the British public.<sup>88</sup> In September the City of London branch of the BEU held a meeting at Leyton Town Hall, at which the Rev. H. D. Longbottom gave an address on the ‘Bolshevik Conspiracy’. In November the branch organised a meeting at the Æolian Hall, at which Nesta Webster ‘exposed the insincerity of the Revolutionary Movement in a masterly analysis of “The History of the World Revolution”’.<sup>89</sup>

Throughout 1920 the *Monthly Record* continued with its themes of the previous year: criticism of Bolshevik Russia, alongside attacks on striking workers and their

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<sup>86</sup> *Scotsman*, 23 March 1920.

<sup>87</sup> *Scotsman*, 13 April 1920.

<sup>88</sup> *The Times*, 29 July 1920; *Scotsman*, 29 July 1920; *Manchester Guardian*, 29 July 1920; *Monthly Record*, September 1920, p. 111.

<sup>89</sup> BEU, *The British Empire Union. Its Branches and What they are Doing* (n. d. [1920]), p. 3, Modern Records Centre, Warwick, Maitland/Sara Collection, MSS.15c/5/7/1.



'Bolshevik' leaders. One article accused Lansbury of 'whitewashing Bolshevism'; while another applauded Sir Winston Churchill for his attacks on Lenin.<sup>90</sup> Others spoke of 'the Horrors of Bolshevik Russia', 'The Red Terror of Bolshevism', and 'The Red Peril'.<sup>91</sup> In June 1920 the BEU placed full page advertisements in the press publicising its 'Campaign against Bolshevism and Industrial Unrest'. It repeated the appeal for £250,000, which, it was pointed out, was urgently needed to fund the campaign; and it warned of the dire consequences for the British Empire if such a figure was not forthcoming:

At the present time Britain is tired.... The microbe of Bolshevism...has a tired victim to attack and has already made dangerous headway.... The heart of Britain is sound, yet it may one day cease to beat if this dreadful disease is allowed to spread.... Just as a minute microbe can destroy a powerful man, so Bolshevism will inevitably destroy the British nation unless the wholesome medicine of truth is administered in time and in the right way.

For the BEU the stakes could not be higher. Success for Bolshevism meant irreversible collapse for the British Empire:

Destroyed nations can never live again. If once the British Empire were to fall, it would fall for ever. Rome, Egypt, Babylon and Persia all were once the governing

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<sup>90</sup> *Monthly Record*, May 1920, p. 64; July 1920, p. 85.

<sup>91</sup> *Monthly Record*, May 1920, p. 63; December 1920, pp. 1, 7.

centres of great empires. Where are they today? Lack of patriotism killed them all.<sup>92</sup>

The BEU pointed out that even if insurrection was a relatively remote possibility in Britain, Bolshevism still presented a serious threat:

The danger from this evil is very great and a serious menace to civilisation. Even if we do not have a revolution as in Russia, the poisonous doctrines now being preached will, unless counteracted, kill all thrift and industry.<sup>93</sup>

The collapse of official British intervention against the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War in early 1920 was followed that summer by the Communist Unity Convention which founded the Communist Party of Great Britain.<sup>94</sup> Amongst pro-interventionist forces, animated protests against abandoning Russia to ‘the policy of the anti-Christ’ and ‘the “bloody baboonery” of Lenin and Trotsky’ subsided to a degree, and concern focused on the potential threat of communism within Britain and its empire.<sup>95</sup> This became a perennial theme of British right-wing politics throughout the inter-war years and beyond. The ‘Red menace’ abroad provided an external enemy useful for maintaining notions of national solidarity; while fear of domestic communism generated mistrust of anything which smacked of radicalism and militancy; and was employed to discredit the wider labour movement. By 1921 the BEU’s ‘primary purpose’ was to

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<sup>92</sup> *The Times*, 24 June 1920.

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in ILP, *Who Pays...*, p.10.

<sup>94</sup> *The Times*, 2 August 1920.

<sup>95</sup> M. Ruotsila, *British and American Anticommunism Before the Cold War*, Frank Cass, London (2001), p. 141.

counter Communist propaganda.<sup>96</sup> It became the leading anti-communist organisation in Britain by the mid-1920s; eclipsing the Anti-Socialist Union, even after that organisation re-invented itself as the Anti-Socialist and Anti-Communist Union in September 1925.<sup>97</sup>

One of the BEU's most prominent campaigns was waged against the dangers associated with Communist Sunday Schools (and the similar Proletarian Sunday School movement, founded by the Glasgow socialist, Tom Anderson).<sup>98</sup> The first mention of the Proletarian Schools in the *Monthly Record* appeared in April 1920; followed by a further article on the schools a month later.<sup>99</sup> Articles focused on the allegedly seditious and blasphemous nature of the teaching in the schools, a theme hammered home to parents and the wider public in a number of BEU leaflets from 1921 onwards, most bearing the emotive call to 'Save the Children'.<sup>100</sup> On 8 July 1921 the BEU sent a deputation to the Bishop of London to discuss the matter; and also sought the support of churchmen from other denominations. Throughout the year the *Empire Record* devoted considerable space to attacking the schools.<sup>101</sup> In September BEU members heckled Communist speakers 'effectively' over the issue at a meeting in Bermondsey Town Hall, after which a 'very successful' meeting of women opposed to the schools was held at a local vicarage.<sup>102</sup> The BEU Grand Council meeting of 24 October made opposition to the 'atheistic and

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<sup>96</sup> Benewick, pp. 39.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, p. 255-6.

<sup>98</sup> F. Reid, 'Socialist Sunday Schools in Britain 1892-1939', *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (April 1966), p. 33.

<sup>99</sup> *Monthly Record*, April 1920, p. 49; May 1920, p. 68.

<sup>100</sup> BEU, *Save the Children from Socialist and Proletarian Schools* (n.d. [1921]), Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service, 135/16/95; BEU, *To Parents. Save the Children of the Nation* (n. d. [1924]), Modern Records Centre, Warwick, MISC.MSS.21/1589.

<sup>101</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1921, pp. 121-4, p. 132; September 1921, p. 140-6; December 1921, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, October 1921, p. 163.

revolutionary doctrines' taught in the schools one of the organisation's official policies.<sup>103</sup>

A full-length exposé of the schools' practices and the menace they posed was drafted by the BEU Secretary, Reginald Wilson, and published under the title *Danger Ahead* in February 1922.<sup>104</sup> It became one of the organisation's best selling publications, going into five editions (19,500 copies) that year alone; a sixth expanded edition in January 1924; and a largely rewritten seventh edition in 1925.<sup>105</sup> Throughout the 1920s the BEU held meetings across the country on the subject, many addressed by the General Secretary;<sup>106</sup> and the issue was regularly revisited in the pages of the *Empire Record*.<sup>107</sup> In 1924 the BEU organised a May Day Festival, at the Hyde Park Hotel, 'in aid of its special campaign against...Proletarian schools'. In June 1925 it organised a ball, hosted by the Countess of Malmesbury, in support of the same cause.<sup>108</sup>

The BEU was closely involved in supporting attempts to pass legislation aimed at curtailing the activities of the schools. Sir John Butcher, the long-serving Conservative MP for York, and a future President of the BEU, was among a group of right-wing MPs and peers who pressed the Home Office to prosecute those involved in teaching and disseminating blasphemous and subversive ideas through Sunday schools.<sup>109</sup> In February 1922 Butcher attempted unsuccessfully to introduce a Seditious Teachings Bill to outlaw the schools. In response the BEU supported Butcher with a petition campaign, in which it

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., November 1921, p. 182.

<sup>104</sup> BEU, *Annual Report* (1924), p. 37.

<sup>105</sup> BEU, *Annual Report* (1924), pp. 11, 38-9; *Empire Record*, January 1924, pp. 24-5; R. Wilson, *Danger Ahead: Socialist and Proletarian Sunday Schools*, Seventh Edition, BEU Research Department, London (1925).

<sup>106</sup> *Empire Record*, September 1922, p. 148; December 1924, p. 13.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., December 1922, p. 11; August 1924, p. 132; September 1926, pp136-7, 140.

<sup>108</sup> *Scotsman*, 26 June 1925.

<sup>109</sup> NA HO 45/11895; NA DPP1/97.

claimed that a staggering 7,012,143 signatures were collected.<sup>110</sup> On the basis of this groundswell of support, Butcher re-introduced his Bill in March 1923. On this occasion it received a second reading and was in the Lords when Parliament was disbanded to facilitate the snap general election which subsequently resulted in the first Labour government.<sup>111</sup> In July 1924 Butcher, by now Lord Danesfort, introduced a similar Bill in the upper chamber. He railed against those who suggested that his Bill would only advertise communism, regarding this as ‘the excuse of a timid mind in order to justify culpable inaction’. Against this ‘policy of the ostrich’ he wished to enact a measure in favour of *child protection*, stating that ‘Surely the State has a...sacred duty to protect the souls and minds of children from moral and spiritual ruin.’<sup>112</sup> With a Labour government in office, however, it was shelved. It re-appeared each year subsequently, but even with the Conservatives firmly in office after 1924 it received little parliamentary time and never made the statute book.<sup>113</sup> The real importance of this parliamentary campaign to the anti-socialist right was the widespread publicity it afforded its anti-subversive message. The BEU stressed that as a result of Butcher’s efforts ‘[p]ublic attention was directed to the existence of this evil in an unmistakable fashion’.<sup>114</sup>

Much was made of the immoral nature of the teaching in the schools. At a meeting at Notting Hill in April 1923 Reginald Wilson claimed the schools were poisoning children’s minds with ‘absolutely disgusting and filthy ideas’.<sup>115</sup> In the Spring

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<sup>110</sup> BEU, *Annual Report*, 1924, pp. 38.

<sup>111</sup> H. Kean, ‘Teachers and the State 1900-30’, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 1989), p. 153, n. 12.

<sup>112</sup> Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates* (House of Lords), Vol. 58, 3 July 1924; *Empire Record*, August 1924, pp. 136-7.

<sup>113</sup> *The Times*, 24 November 1925, 12 March 1927, 2 July, 14 October 1927, 13 December 1930.

<sup>114</sup> BEU, *Annual Report* (1924), p.11.

<sup>115</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1923, p. 84.

of 1924 he wrote that the ‘watchword of the movement is Banish Gods from the Skies and Capitalists from the Earth’; and claimed to have uncovered evidence that:

free love...is taught in some of the ‘underground’ revolutionary schools...there is no doubt at all that in *Proletcult*, the monthly organ of this movement, articles have appeared under the title of ‘Sex Knowledge’ that could not be printed in any decent newspaper. Yet this magazine is specifically stated to be ‘for boys and girls’.<sup>116</sup>

The BEU divulged the matter to the authorities. Consequently, Anderson and two others were ‘detained and charged before a magistrate with publishing and selling obscene literature’.<sup>117</sup>

In August 1924 the *Empire Record* carried an appeal for funds to enable the training of ‘a number of very poor and neglected children in the principles of religion and patriotism’. The BEU believed there was ‘grave danger of their being recognised as excellent material for the moulding of young revolutionaries of an extreme type’, and wished to ‘save these children’ by gathering them into a room on Sunday afternoons, where they would be ‘taught and helped to become good citizens of our country’. The BEU felt certain funds would be forthcoming ‘from those who are anxious to give some practical help in a direct counter effort to the work of revolutionaries among children’.<sup>118</sup> Subsequent issues of the *Empire Record* do not refer to this initiative, however, and it must be assumed that it remained a dead letter. This failing should not be taken to

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<sup>116</sup> *Scotsman*, 10 March 1924, 5 April 1924.

<sup>117</sup> BEU, *Annual Report 1924*, pp. 11, 29; *Danger Ahead...* (1925), p.7.

<sup>118</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1924, p. 132.

indicate that the BEU did not seriously interest itself in constructive methods for winning children away from communism. They were responsible for numerous benevolent and educational initiatives, aimed primarily at instilling patriotism and loyalty in working-class children. In June 1921 two leading female BEU members, Miss Almaz Stout and Mrs Gee, were praised by the *Empire Record* for their work among the poor children of Bermondsey. The ‘great object’ of such efforts was ‘to bring them up as patriots ready to serve their king and country. To teach them what the British Empire means, and to counteract the pernicious teachings of the Proletarian Sunday Schools’.<sup>119</sup> Other activities organised by BEU branches included essay competitions for children on subjects such as ‘The Ideals and Duties of Citizenship’;<sup>120</sup> screenings of patriotic films, such as ‘Our Mighty Empire’ and ‘The Battle of Zeebrugge’; and performances of plays such as ‘The Masque of Empire’;<sup>121</sup> organising visits by children to the British Empire Exhibition;<sup>122</sup> and hosting an annual ‘Christmas Party to Poor British Children’.<sup>123</sup> Branches of the BEU emphasised ‘the importance of teaching patriotism, civics and Elementary Political Economy in primary schools’.<sup>124</sup> Most importantly, from 1926 the BEU became closely associated with the distribution of free commemorative medals to children on Empire Day, an activity explicitly devised to ‘save’ children from communism.

The idea of a special day to celebrate the achievements of the British Empire appears to have originated in Canada in the 1890s. Its most persistent British advocate was Reginald Brabazon, 12<sup>th</sup> Earl of Meath, who set up the Empire Day movement in

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<sup>119</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1921, p. 102.

<sup>120</sup> BEU, *Annual Report* (1923), p. 19.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16; *Empire Record*, January 1922, p. 28; May 1922, p. 88; May 1923, p. 52.

<sup>122</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1924, pp.132-3.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, February 1931, p. 43.

<sup>124</sup> BEU, *Annual Report* (1923), p. 19.

1904.<sup>125</sup> After the Great War the event was widely utilised by the BEU to spread their anti-socialist message among children. MacKenzie has noted that the BEU ‘sought to secure a wider acceptance of Empire Day, organised Empire Day gatherings, and distributed thousands of medals and flags to schools’.<sup>126</sup> For the BEU, however, Empire Day was not merely an excuse to unfurl bunting and eat cakes. As Jim English points out, ‘in the context of perceived threats to the Empire at home and abroad...the political right seized upon Empire Day as an opportunity to attack what were seen as seditious groups’.<sup>127</sup> The BEU, in particular, saw a natural congruence between the aims of Empire Day and its own ultra-nationalist, anti-socialist agenda.

The BEU’s novel contribution to Empire Day – the distribution of Empire Day medals to children in schools and hospitals – first occurred in 1926 using 30,000 medals manufactured at the Royal Mint.<sup>128</sup> This practice was intended as an explicitly anti-communist measure. A February 1926 letter to the press over the names of the presidents of the BEU, NCU and the National Union of Manufacturers highlights the motivation behind the scheme:

A determined alien-inspired attempt is being made to capture the next generation for atheism and revolution. The instilling of a love and appreciation of the Empire is the only antidote; the younger generation must be taught to revere their wonderful heritage.... We therefore suggest the distribution to each child on

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<sup>125</sup> J. O. Springhall, ‘Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (October 1970), p. 105; J. English, ‘Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958’, *Historical Journal*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (2006), p. 248.

<sup>126</sup> J. M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion 1880-1960*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (1984), p. 157.

<sup>127</sup> English, p. 264-5.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.



Empire Day of a medal symbolic of the British Empire.... A child who wears this medal will have no use for the Communist red flag and badge....We invite orders for medals, offers of co-operation in their distribution, and especially donations which will enable medals to be issued to children in poorer districts. Unless medals are supplied free for distribution in these areas the children in places where Socialism and Communism are most prevalent will not receive them.<sup>129</sup>

The BEU encouraged as many people as possible to become involved in Empire Day celebrations and went into great detail in its publications about how to make the event successful, with suggestions for ‘Empire Tableaux’ and other stunts.<sup>130</sup> In many localities the BEU orchestrated Empire Day celebrations, donating ‘flags, maps and essay prizes to schools’ to ensure a suitable level of interest.<sup>131</sup>

From 1920 the *Empire Record* became a vociferous mouthpiece for the BEU’s attacks on the newly formed Communist Party of Great Britain. The journal carried excerpts from the Marxist press in a regular column called ‘The Revolutionary Campaign’, subsequently renamed ‘The Revolutionary Press’; and it called upon the support of ‘every Patriot for a Campaign among the workers, when by means of outdoor meetings, posters, leaflets, newspaper articles, advertisements, the cinema, etc., this danger can be met’.<sup>132</sup> The BEU was routinely engaged in this kind of anti-communist work, as well as more confrontational activities, which included meetings designed to

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<sup>129</sup> *Scotsman*, 23 February 1926.

<sup>130</sup> *Your Empire* (1929), pp. 61-4.

<sup>131</sup> M. Harper, “‘Personal Contact is Worth a Ton of Text-Books’: Educational Tours of the Empire, 1926-39”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol.32, No.3 (September 2004), p. 51; *The Times*, 21 February 1927, 25 May 1928, 24 May 1929.

<sup>132</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1921, p. 182.

coincide in time and place with Communist Party gatherings; and the heckling and asking of awkward questions of Communist speakers.<sup>133</sup> Such activity was claimed to have been successful in stifling Communist progress in a number of industrial centres, including Coventry, Mansfield, the Staffordshire Potteries, and at Sheffield, where ‘BEU working men’ held public debates with Communist speakers.<sup>134</sup> At Birmingham the BEU held regular meetings in the Bull Ring to counter the city’s Communists, while the local BEU organiser, Captain Owen-Lewis often addressed local Unionist Clubs regarding the ‘Red’ threat.<sup>135</sup> Liverpool was another industrial city where the BEU determined to face the communist threat head on. In April 1923 alone, the organisation claimed to have held 38 meetings in the city, attended by some 16,000 people. Many were held in Islington Square, which was well known as ‘a happy hunting ground of Communists and other Red agitators’. In this ‘frankly hostile’ place the BEU claimed to have met with ‘wonderful’ successes.<sup>136</sup> Examples of similar successful anti-communist campaigning peppered the pages of the *Empire Record* throughout the 1920s, and were summarised each year in the organisation’s *Annual Report*.<sup>137</sup>

BEU meetings often ended ‘in some disorder’ as opposing sides fought to get their views heard; though the BEU claimed that on most occasions that ‘the honours of war...remain with the BEU’.<sup>138</sup> Such victories were often due to the voluntary efforts of what the *Empire Record* described as loyal ‘henchmen’, whose services were procured

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<sup>133</sup> *Empire Record*, February 1922, p. 37; July 1923, p. 119; December 1925, p. 10-11.

<sup>134</sup> *Empire Record*, February 1921, p. 32; November 1921, p. 174.

<sup>135</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1923, p. 63.

<sup>136</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1923, p. 84.

<sup>137</sup> BEU, *Annual Report*, (1924), pp. 14-22, 31-2; (1925), pp. 19-22, 26, 29; (1927), pp. 5-7, 9, 17-18; (1929), pp. 9-10, 17.

<sup>138</sup> *Empire Record*, October 1921, p. 163; November 1921, p. 176.

specifically to deal with objectors and hecklers.<sup>139</sup> At Edmonton, North London, in 1921 a local conflict between Communists and patriotic ex-servicemen occurred over the flying of the Union Jack or the Red Flag; a struggle which the BEU subsequently became involved in. The BEU claimed that as a result of its intervention, the ‘Communists, formerly a power in the locality, are nowhere now...they are negligible. We cut them under. And they are going to stay under’.<sup>140</sup> BEU agitation was claimed to be responsible for a split between Labour and the Communists in the district, leading to the resignation of two Communist councillors, who were subsequently replaced by members of the BEU.<sup>141</sup> Similar success was proclaimed at Croydon, where residents expressed their ‘cordial appreciation of the fight that has been...waged against the Red Flag’. The Communists’ emblem and the ideas it symbolised were excoriated as a symbol of foreign, ungodly ideals:

It is up to the BEU to fight the Red Flag principle with all our strength of mind and heart, and to show up the dark secrets that are hidden beneath its folds, calling upon all true Englishmen to join us in the crusade against the alien devil.<sup>142</sup>

The most notorious incident in this series of clashes between the BEU and Communists came at a meeting of the Union at Central Hall, Westminster, on 28 October 1921, which was to have been addressed by the BEU’s recently appointed President, the Earl of Derby. On this occasion it was the Reds who had the upper-hand, effectively disrupting

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<sup>139</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1921, p. 85.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Empire Record*, October 1921, p. 163; November 1921, p. 174.

<sup>142</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1921, p. 102.

the meeting with rattles, stink-bombs and howls. The platform was stormed, and the Union Jack allegedly torn up and spat on. The BEU held the incident up as testimony to the 'imperative necessity for all decent citizens to band themselves together in a common organisation to fight the menace of Communism'. It was interpreted as a response to the success of their anti-communist campaign, proving how much the Communists dreaded 'the growing influence and intensifying activities' of the BEU.<sup>143</sup> According to the organisation's Vice-Chairman, Sir Ernest Wild, the 'outrage' had only served to strengthen the determination of the BEU to 'carry on the fight' against communism, and had contributed to 'a considerable accession to the Union's membership'.<sup>144</sup>

Less confrontational were the numerous education campaigns inaugurated by the BEU in working-class areas, designed explicitly to inoculate the masses against communism and to win back those who had been led astray by the agents of Moscow.<sup>145</sup> Basil Thomson's assessment of the role of the various anti-Bolshevist groups which had emerged in early 1919 tended to dismiss simple leaflet campaigns, and favoured those organisations which employed the 'more effective method of mobilising loyal workmen in factories, working men's clubs, and public houses, to neutralise the poison instilled by the extremists'.<sup>146</sup> The BEU can certainly be counted as such an organisation. Throughout the 1920s the dominant theme of BEU propaganda was 'Industrial Peace'; and in January 1920 the organisation launched its own Industrial Peace Department to carry this message into the heart of working-class communities. The objective of the campaign was to allay industrial unrest 'by laying before the workers facts relating to the

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<sup>143</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1921, pp. 173-4; December 1921, pp. 9-11.

<sup>144</sup> *Scotsman*, 4 November 1921.

<sup>145</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1921, p. 99.

<sup>146</sup> NA CAB/24/76/376.

production and distribution of wealth, the relation of output and prices, the effect of unfavourable foreign exchanges, and the present position of the country in the world's markets'. The Industrial Peace Department was established on a permanent basis following a number of successful campaigns on this theme during 1919. This experience convinced the BEU leadership of the 'urgent need for continuous educational propaganda throughout the industrial areas, where hitherto the preachers of Marxism and Bolshevism have had it all their own way. The mass of workers are not revolutionary; and we owe it to them to give them a chance of hearing both sides of the question'.<sup>147</sup>

Vital to the work of the Industrial Peace Department was co-operation with ultra-patriotic elements in the labour movement which rejected Bolshevism and direct action, favouring instead what the left described as 'yellow' unions, committed to accommodation with employers. Examples of this kind of co-operation are legion, with numerous 'patriotic Labour' figures speaking on BEU platforms throughout the interwar years. In December 1919, for instance, Charles Stanton, NDP MP for Aberdare, speaking at a BEU meeting at Wigmore Hall, London, described direct action as 'an outrage to political decency' and 'denounced certain of its advocates as "disciples of Lenin and Trotsky"...who, having been turned out of the House of Commons, were still planning and organising bleeding the Trade Unions, and by their teachings leading the workers of the country astray'. While Stanton wanted 'justice for the workers and prosperity for all' he insisted that this could never be brought about by direct action and 'shouting for Soviets for the people', but would be achieved through 'organising Labour and industry

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<sup>147</sup> *The Times*, 13 December 1919.

in such a way that there shall be reconciliation between the men who invest their money in industry and the men they employ'.<sup>148</sup>

Along with Stanton and his ilk the BEU focused much of its fire on left-wing advocates of direct action in the labour movement, particularly Robert Williams of the Transport Workers Federation and miners' leader Robert Smillie. In May 1919 Reginald Wilson wrote to Lloyd George and Bonar Law calling for Smillie to be removed from the Royal Commission into the future of the coal industry because of his threat to employ the general strike tactic, which was regarded as an attack on 'those taxpayers and consumers' whom the BEU claimed to represent:

Experience has taught us that the general strike defeats its own ends, and that to allow this kind of braggadocio to inflict further crushing burdens upon the middle classes, and the immense body of unorganised labour in this country...would be a species of moral cowardice to which this Union can be no party.<sup>149</sup>

While the BEU was a prominent source of public propaganda directed against labour militancy it was also engaged in a very much hands-on struggle with the left in Britain's trade union movement, of which the Industrial Peace campaign was merely the public face. It has been pointed out by John Hope that the BEU 'operated its own private network of "special agencies" to collect intelligence on its left-wing adversaries and

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<sup>148</sup> *Scotsman*, 18 December 1919. Historians have subsequently come to realise that 'the men who invest their money in industry' also made substantial contributions to promote Stanton's political career (see, for example, B. M. Doyle, 'Who Paid the Price of Patriotism? The Funding of Charles Stanton during the Merthyr Boroughs By-Election of 1915', *English Historical Review*, Vol. 109, No. 434 (November 1994), pp. 1215-1222).

<sup>149</sup> *Scotsman*, 30 May 1919.

engage in sabotage operations against them'.<sup>150</sup> Evidence of such activity has proved elusive; though as Hope notes, it is suggested from a close reading of the organisation's publications, which include occasional mentions of a BEU 'silent service department' or 'secret service'.<sup>151</sup> In 1977 Ron Bean published documentary evidence from the Cunard Papers exposing clandestine anti-labour activities in the North West of England, carried out by the Secretary of the Liverpool BEU branch, James McGuirk Hughes.<sup>152</sup> This surreptitious work included the infiltration of Communist Party branches and those of the Minority Movement and the Organised Unemployed Movement (later the National Unemployed Workers' Movement).<sup>153</sup> This activity enabled the BEU to remain one step ahead of its opponents, and was used to collect information and to facilitate acts of sabotage.<sup>154</sup> Bean's research established that Hughes operated as part of a national network of agents working for an organisation funded by business interests. Subsequent authors attempting to pursue this line of enquiry have, in the face of scant and sometimes unreliable evidence, been forced to make a series of speculative assumptions regarding this activity. Recent work by Gill Bennett, however, has provided much needed veridical substance to a number of these assumptions. Most notably, Bennett's privileged access to unreleased Secret Intelligence Service files has confirmed Hughes' and Hope's contention that Sir George Makgill, the founder and Honorary Secretary of the BEU, was the shadowy 'Sir George McGill' referred to in the cryptic and deliberately misleading autobiography of John Baker White, one-time Director of the Economic League. Baker White states that 'McGill created and directed a highly efficient private intelligence

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<sup>150</sup> Hope, 'British fascism and the state...', p. 75.

<sup>151</sup> *Empire Record*, January 1922, p. 20, June 1925, p. 104,

<sup>152</sup> Bean, 'Liverpool Shipping Employers...', pp. 22-6.

<sup>153</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1923, p. 51.

<sup>154</sup> Bean, pp. 22-6.

service' which was primarily, though not exclusively, concerned with fighting communist-inspired subversion. 'McGill' was a close personal friend of Vernon Kell, the founder and head of MI5, and 'could always see the Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet whenever he wished and at short notice'.<sup>155</sup> The fact that there does not appear to have been a 'Sir George McGill' living at this time, along with evidence of a friendship between Sir George Makgill and Kell, and Makgill's association with a number of right-wing and patriotic organisations, convinced Hughes and Hope that they were one and the same. Bennett's research into the Zinoviev Letter affair shows that Makgill formed an organisation called the Industrial Intelligence Board on the instigation of 'the Federation of British Industries and...the Coal Owners' and Shipowners' Associations' which wished to 'set up an organisation to acquire intelligence on industrial unrest and keep employers informed on Labour matters, including Trade Union and Communist activities'. The IIB acted as a link between these organisations and Makgill's contacts within Whitehall's intelligence community, with meetings of Makgill's dining club – the Monday Club – acting as the hub of this activity.<sup>156</sup> Bennett's biography of SIS agent, Desmond Morton, expands on this, confirming unequivocally that Makgill was indeed the 'McGill' Baker White refers to. Makgill is described by Bennett as 'ultra-conservative in his views and full of ideas about the efficient management of labour (including a deep-rooted dislike of Trades Unionism)'. For him Bolshevism 'threatened the very core of British Imperial capitalism and imperilled the postwar return to profitability'. Such views made Makgill highly amenable to the invitation from

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<sup>155</sup> J. Baker White, *True Blue: An Autobiography 1902-1939*, Frederick Muller, London (1970), p.129.

<sup>156</sup> G. Bennett, "'A most extraordinary and mysterious business": The Zinoviev Letter of 1924', *Foreign and Commonwealth Office History Notes*, No. 14 (January 1999), p. 38; N. West, *MASK: MI5's Penetration of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, Routledge, London (2005), p.15.



industrialists to form the IIB.<sup>157</sup> Intimate links with British business interests were also *openly* fostered and proclaimed by the BEU. Alongside articles attacking trade union militancy in the *Empire Record*, were a significant number extolling publicly the alleged virtues of capitalism and private enterprise.<sup>158</sup> The organisation regularly boasted of the large number of businesses which sponsored it.<sup>159</sup>

During 1925 the BEU was involved in moves to create a national strikebreaking force capable of standing up to the looming threat of a general strike. This culminated in September with the formation of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS). Those few historians who have examined the OMS have tended to focus on its relationship with the Baldwin government; giving particular attention to the controversy which erupted on the eve of the General Strike regarding the participation of the British Fascists in the organisation.<sup>160</sup> The relationship between the OMS and established anti-socialist bodies like the BEU and NCU has been overshadowed by this debate.

The nature of the OMS is itself a source of controversy. Contemporary partisans of the left tended to describe the organisation in a simplistic manner as an official government body;<sup>161</sup> while the OMS itself went to great lengths to prove that it was an entirely unofficial body, which, while it supported the Conservative government, would willingly offer its services to any 'Constitutional' government irrespective of its political

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<sup>157</sup> G. Bennett, *Churchill's Man of Mystery: Desmond Morton and the World of Intelligence*, Routledge, London (2007), pp. 71-9. Confusingly, Bennett refers to Makgill's organisation as the Industrial Intelligence Bureau in her most recent study.

<sup>158</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1921, p. 48; June 1921, p. 99; July 1921, p. 116; November 1922, p. 186; June 1922, p. 100-1.

<sup>159</sup> *Empire Record*, September 1921, p. 151; BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, p. 2.

<sup>160</sup> R. C. Maguire, "'The Fascists...are...to be depended upon.'" The British Government, Fascists and Strike-breaking during 1925 and 1926', in N. Copsey and D. Renton (eds.), *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, Palgrave, London (2005), pp. 6-26; B. Farr, 'The British Fascists, the OMS, and the General Strike: right-wing activism in the 1920s', *Societas* (Autumn 1975), pp. 255-77

<sup>161</sup> Farr, *The Development and Impact...*, p.58.

complexion.<sup>162</sup> Although there is some evidence supporting the OMS position,<sup>163</sup> there is much to suggest that – in common with organisations like the BEU and NCU – the OMS had extensive informal links with the Conservative government. A number of its founders were former government officials;<sup>164</sup> and it was viewed favourably by certain Cabinet Ministers and by backbench Conservative MPs and peers. The initial reaction to the OMS of the Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson-Hicks, was to commend its ‘preparation of lists of citizens prepared to carry on essential services...in the interests of the community’.<sup>165</sup> A connection – again unofficial – with the security services also exists, in George Makgill, for whom the General Strike was to prove the last great battle against ‘Bolshevism’ before his death on 17 October 1926, aged fifty-seven.<sup>166</sup> Hughes has speculated that ‘the OMS might well have been...[Makgill’s]...brainchild’, a suggestion given some credence in documents unearthed by John Hope.<sup>167</sup>

The uncertainty of the exact relationship between the OMS and the state prompts Farr to declare ‘This was not collusion, but confusion, and government policy was shrouded in ambiguity’.<sup>168</sup> Despite this it is relatively safe to suggest that on many issues, the views of the publicly stated leaders of the OMS coincided with those of many in government circles, blurring any supposed line between independence and government sanction. The organisation’s formation undoubtedly came at a propitious time for the government, providing a ‘non-governmental’ solution to the dilemma of putting in place

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<sup>162</sup> *The Times*, 15 February 1926.

<sup>163</sup> Notes on the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies Committee's work in Norfolk, 1926, Norfolk Record Office, Bulwer of Heydon Family Papers, BUL 16/76, 705 x 5 1926.

<sup>164</sup> Farr, p.58.

<sup>165</sup> *The Times*, 14 October 1925.

<sup>166</sup> *The Times*, 20 October 1926.

<sup>167</sup> NA HO45/12336/11.

<sup>168</sup> Farr, p. 59.

mechanisms for dealing with a potential general strike whilst avoiding undue provocation or the impression that such a conflict was inevitable.<sup>169</sup>

One thing about the OMS that can be stated with certainty is that from its inception, it was intimately linked with the BEU. In October and November 1925 the BEU offered 'to co-operate with and render all possible help to' the OMS. In December the *Empire Record* reported that this approach had born fruit in an 'arrangement for mutual co-operation' between the Council of the OMS and the BEU Board of Management.<sup>170</sup> The BEU believed that there was 'ideal scope' for co-operation between the two bodies, as their 'respective labours are absolutely complimentary'. While the BEU strived through propagandist means 'to prevent an emergency and to get capital and labour to work in harmony', the OMS was intended to 'safeguard the life-blood of the country if the emergency does eventualise'. The main points of the agreement were as follows:

The OMS will leave all formative or propagandist work (except in the Press) to the British Empire Union, and will in some way make this arrangement known publicly.

The BEU will commend the OMS to the audiences at its meetings as occasion arises and endeavour to obtain recruits.

As far as Press work is concerned the BEU will work with the OMS.

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<sup>169</sup> *The Times*, 15 February, 13 April 1926.

<sup>170</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1925, p. 12.

Each body will supply the other with such information as reaches it or is likely to be useful to the common cause.<sup>171</sup>

While much of this type of activity was planned and coordinated in secret, the leaders of the BEU and similar bodies needed contact with the wider public in order to make their schemes effective. In this regard the *Empire Record* was a crucial organising tool as well as a simple mouthpiece for BEU propaganda. It contained articles, cartoons, reports from branches and lists of upcoming activities. Additionally the organisation produced large numbers of leaflets and pamphlets, although many of these consisted of reprints from the *Empire Record*. The BEU also had its own ‘Research Department’ and from December 1919 published the *Weekly Circular*, a confidential anti-socialist intelligence briefing aimed explicitly at ‘leaders of industry’, providing subscribers with up to date information to assist in their struggles with trade unions and the left.<sup>172</sup> In addition to its own printed output, the BEU General Secretary, Reginald Wilson, was a prolific correspondent with both the national and provincial press. The organisation made a number of confidential appeals to its business backers to finance advertising campaigns in ‘the principal Sunday Newspapers which appeal to the working classes’. An example from November 1921 survives along with proofs of the advertisements – in this case advocating secret ballots in trade disputes – for the approval of those called upon to fund the campaign.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, p. 31; *Empire Record*, February 1921, p. 26.

<sup>173</sup> Modern Records Centre, Warwick, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation papers, MSS.36/A24/2.

## FOR LEADERS OF INDUSTRY.

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Figure 1.1. *Empire Record*, January 1922, p. 30.

The BEU was also at the forefront of attempts to consolidate the myriad forces of British anti-Bolshevism after the war. Objection to the existence of too many anti-Bolshevist societies and the consequent wastefulness of resources and ‘overlapping’ of effort was a perennial theme in the organisation’s discourse. The BEU’s powerful financial backing in the early 1920s allowed it to develop a national profile which put many smaller anti-Bolshevist organisations in the shade. By 1921 the BEU had absorbed about twenty such organisations in England and Ireland.<sup>174</sup> Among these can be counted the Manchester-based Britain for the British Movement, which became the Manchester and District Branch of the BEU on 7 October 1920;<sup>175</sup> and the Stourbridge and District Citizens’ League, which became a sub-branch of the BEU around the same time.<sup>176</sup> Despite such successes the General Secretary of the BEU, Reginald Wilson, was moved

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<sup>174</sup> Cowling, *The Impact of Labour...*, p. 75

<sup>175</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 8 October 1920; BEU, *The British Empire Union. Its Branches and What they are Doing*, p. 5.

<sup>176</sup> *Empire Record*, October 1921, p. 163.

in September 1921 to respond to calls in the *Spectator* for a 'Citizens' League' by stating that 'Already there are far too many leagues and organisations with similar objects in existence'. He expressed the hope that the Federation of British Propaganda Societies, to which the BEU was affiliated, 'will do much to bring about co-ordination of effort and avoid waste of time, money and energy'.<sup>177</sup> The Federation, which had been set up that summer, was run by David Gilmore with the Duke of Northumberland acting as President.<sup>178</sup> According to Nesta Webster 'the plan fell through...owing to the difficulty in getting the chairmen and secretaries of the different organisations to unite in the common cause'.<sup>179</sup>

Another feature of the BEU anti-communism was its relentless propaganda campaign against what it described as 'Sinn Fein Bolshevism' in Ireland.<sup>180</sup> In March 1921 the *Empire Record* reported approvingly a speech by Sir Hamar Greenwood, Coalition Liberal MP for Sunderland, which stated that 'Sinn Fein Extremists and their Soviet colleagues...have conspired to smash the Empire'. Greenwood claimed that Irish nationalism was part of an 'international conspiracy'; and that Irish events were being 'watched by sinister eyes...throughout the world'. Success for Sinn Fein would 'mean the break up of the Empire and our civilisation'.<sup>181</sup> That autumn the BEU Grand Council

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<sup>177</sup> *Empire Record*, September 1921, p. 144.

<sup>178</sup> *The Times*, 20 June 1921; *Morning Post*, 21 June 1921. Gilmore was the former secretary of the Lanarkshire Miners' Federation, who had resigned during the war over the radical anti-war stance of some of his colleagues. He was an outspoken anti-Bolshevist and was secretary of the British Workers' League/National Democratic Party from late 1918, editing its periodical, the *British Citizen and Empire Worker*, between late 1921 and his death in 1926 (*Empire Record*, July 1921, p. 113; Stubbs, p. 751; Douglas, 'The National Democratic Party...', pp. 544, 548, 551).

<sup>179</sup> Webster, *The Surrender of an Empire*, p. 267.

<sup>180</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1921, p. 81.

<sup>181</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1921, p. 44.

passed a motion urging that 'Ireland should never be recognised as a sovereign or independent State'.<sup>182</sup>

Beyond issuing anti-nationalist propaganda, the British anti-socialist right sought to organise on the ground in Ireland. There is some evidence of organisation in the south of the country in the years following the Great War. A branch of the MCU was set up in Dublin in the spring of 1919, and its secretary was 'hopeful of getting hundreds, if not thousands of members'.<sup>183</sup> However, due to the conditions of guerrilla warfare in the south and west of the country, and the hostility of sections of the Catholic population to British imperialism, most of the right's activity was confined to the north-east corner of Ireland, with its loyalist, Protestant majority. In the case of both the BEU and the MCU/NCU the six counties of truncated Ulster, which after 1921 formed the state of Northern Ireland, were to prove a highly productive recruiting ground. This was particularly true of Belfast, where the local branches of the two organisations merged to avoid duplication of effort. The united body boasted thousands of members, a number of whom were influential Unionist politicians, including councillors, MPs, Cabinet members, and the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, Sir James Craig.

During the elections to the new Northern Ireland Parliament in May 1921 it was the calls for a solid Unionist vote from Craig, and BEU President, Sir Edward Carson, which grabbed the headlines in loyalist newspapers. Carson urged 'every loyal man and woman in Ulster to rally round for civil and religious liberties. Ulster must be saved from the tyranny of the assassin'. Craig called on the electorate to 'Do your duty, let no one stand aside. The cause is sacred and worthy of every personal sacrifice'. He concluded by

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<sup>182</sup> *Empire Record*, October 1921, p. 165.

<sup>183</sup> *The Times*, 26 April 1919.

pointing out that ‘The eyes of our friends throughout the Empire are upon us. Let them see that we are as determined as they to uphold the cause of Loyalty’.<sup>184</sup> The Belfast BEU branch contributed to the election campaign by issuing a manifesto echoing these sentiments and stressing the imperial implications of the election. At a ‘large and representative meeting’ of the branch James A. Thompson, Chairman of the Executive Committee, declared that ‘they all had the greatest confidence in Sir James Craig’, while Lady Kennedy, speaking for the Executive of the Ladies’ Committee, stressed that ‘a strong loyal majority in the Northern Parliament was essential’.<sup>185</sup>

At the level of street politics, too, the BEU was active in support of the loyalist cause, adding its own speciality – anti-Bolshevism – to the sectarian battleground of Belfast politics. This was dramatically manifested in the ‘Ulster Hall incident’ when the BEU, ‘in co-operation with the Ulster ex-Service Men’s Association and the Ulster Protestant Association’, organised a body of armed Harland and Wolff shipyard workers to disrupt a rally intended to show support for the unofficial candidates of the Belfast Labour Party (BLP) in the May election. The BEU characterised the BLP men as ‘Sinn Fein Bolsheviks’, and amid ‘stirring scenes’ the BEU-inspired mob physically prevented the rally from taking place.<sup>186</sup> In the face of such intimidation and the general dominance of sectarianism in the city, this fledgling socialist electoral challenge to Unionism was seriously hampered. All forty of the candidates put up by the Ulster Unionists were subsequently elected, while the three BLP candidates lost their deposits in a ‘disastrous

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<sup>184</sup> *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 May 1921.

<sup>185</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1921, p. 103.

<sup>186</sup> *Scotsman*, 19 May 1921; *Empire Record*, August 1921, p. 133.



showing'.<sup>187</sup> The Unionists' crushing victory, which ensured loyalist dominance in the new parliament and thus the state, elicited the hearty congratulations of the *Empire Record*, which declared that 'The Loyal and Imperial Province has once more proved her claim to that title'.<sup>188</sup> The BLP later attempted to rebuild its local support base by focusing on economic issues, partly under the auspices of the Belfast Anti-Profiteering Committee. Despite its wholehearted support for the profit motive, the BEU, along with the Ulster Unionist Labour Association (formed in 1917 by Sir Edward Carson to counteract socialism amongst working-class Unionists), and the Ulster Ex-Servicemen's Association, became involved in the anti-profiteering movement and 'effectively precluded whatever potential...[it]...had as a vehicle for the non-sectarian class politics of the BLP'.<sup>189</sup>

The high level of support for the BEU in Belfast at this time can be gathered from the annual report and statement of accounts presented to the fifth annual meeting of the branch, held at the city's YMCA Hall in July 1921. These claimed that the membership of the branch had grown from 321 in 1917 to 5,058 in 1921. During the same period, the income of the branch had risen from £130 to £1,396. Strangely, given such clear evidence of the vitality of the branch, James Thompson moved a resolution 'empowering the chairman of the meeting to ascertain the view of the members as to whether the branch should be wound up or not'. He explained that this was due to concern that the 'deplorable trade depression' that existed at that time might make it very difficult to maintain the branch's income, 'a considerable portion of which had come from business

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<sup>187</sup> C. Norton, 'The left in Northern Ireland 1921-1932', *Labour History Review*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (Spring 1995), p. 4.

<sup>188</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1921, p. 103.

<sup>189</sup> Norton, pp. 3-5.

houses in the city in past years'. The proposal led to a number of speeches highlighting the dangers of Bolshevism in Ireland and the wider empire, and stressing the vital role played by the BEU in Ulster in resisting this menace. Sir Robert Kennedy attacked both 'Prussianism' and 'Bolshevism', both of which were 'working in a tremendous revolutionary conspiracy against the Empire'. This view was echoed in a passionate, almost evangelical, speech by Councillor Alex M'Kay, a representative of the shipyard workers, who stated that under such circumstances, with 'so many influences at work for the destruction of the British Empire', it would be the 'utmost humiliation' to dissolve the Belfast branch of the Union:

Those who are responsible for the carrying on of the propaganda work of the Union were too kid gloved and too sedate. They should come to the streets to counter these other influences so rampant in our midst. If they allowed that branch of the Union to be swept to one side, they were sinning against the Empire to which they were proud to belong.... The boys of the shipyards would not be true to their principle if they agreed to drop this branch. Please God they would carry it on.

Following further 'vigorous speeches' the branch voted overwhelmingly to carry on its activities.<sup>190</sup>

As in the rest of Britain, the BEU, a predominantly middle-class organisation with aristocratic patronage, assiduously sought allies among patriotic workers. In Belfast this strategy resulted in close co-operation with organisations which were patently not 'kid-

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<sup>190</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1921, p. 133.

gloved and too sedate'. Indeed, it seems reasonably clear that at least one of the organisations which mobilised alongside the BEU at the Ulster Hall in May 1921 regularly engaged in acts of extreme terrorist violence against the Catholic minority in the province. The Ulster Protestant Association, formed in 1920, was essentially a sectarian murder gang, which was later described by the Royal Ulster Constabulary as an organisation 'dominated by the Protestant hooligan element [whose] whole aim and object was simply the extermination of Catholics by any and every means'.<sup>191</sup> Many of these attacks occurred with the collusion of elements among the Ulster Special Constabulary.<sup>192</sup>

To counter the perceived threat of Bolshevism within the wider British Empire, the BEU encouraged white settler populations to set up organisations similar to their own, and sought to co-operate with other existing anti-socialist forces. The BEU had a number of affiliates in the Dominions and beyond, including bodies in New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania, New Zealand, Egypt, Canada, South Africa and India.<sup>193</sup> The British Empire Union of Australia was formed during the Great War; and much of its early propaganda centred on questions of loyalty to the crown and support for the war effort.<sup>194</sup> In spring 1918 the organisation launched a campaign of petitions and public meetings 'against disloyalty and Sinn Fein', during which it secured the support of other patriotic organisations. Acting under the name of the Citizens' Loyalist Committee, these bodies

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<sup>191</sup> District Inspector Spears, 'Memorandum to Northern Ireland Minister of Home Affairs, February 7, 1923', PRONI T2258.

<sup>192</sup> M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants, The Formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary and the Royal Ulster Constabulary, 1920-7*, Pluto, London (1983), p. 279; P. McMahon, *British Spies and Irish Rebels: British Intelligence and Ireland, 1916-1945*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge (2008), p. 155.

<sup>193</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1923, p. 85; BEU, *Annual Report, 1927*, p. 19; BEU, *Annual Report, 1928*, p. 20.

<sup>194</sup> The Victoria Branch was founded in 1915 by Colonel C. E. Merrett (BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, p. 24). According to Elizabeth Kwan the BEU of Australia was also known as the League of Empire (E. Kwan, 'National Parliament, National Symbols: From British to Australian Identity', accessed at [http://wopared.parl.net/Senate/pubs/occa\\_lect/transcripts/040507/040507.pdf](http://wopared.parl.net/Senate/pubs/occa_lect/transcripts/040507/040507.pdf) on 10 March 2008).

planned a ‘monster patriotic demonstration’ in Melbourne in support of the war and the British Empire.<sup>195</sup>

The Australian BEU boasted a number of prominent supporters. Its President until 1927 was William Scott Fell, a businessman with interests in shipping and coal, and an Independent Nationalist Member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. Among its Vice-Presidents were Sir William MacMillan, D. M Anderson (MLA), and Archdeacon Boyce.<sup>196</sup> Other members included the philanthropist, Thomas Rofe.<sup>197</sup>

The activities of the Australian BEU mirrored those of its parent organisation. As in the UK a myriad of anti-Bolshevist groups emerged after the war and Australia’s ‘conservative politicians...exploited the red scare with material provided by the security service and encouragement from employers’ groups and the press’.<sup>198</sup> The BEU later promoted Empire Day among conservative politicians as a means of winning the electorate away from the Australian Labour Party.<sup>199</sup> The Australian BEU’s 1924 annual report noted that it was suffering, as were other patriotic societies in Australia, due to ‘the apathy of the loyal public’. It was felt, however, that the growth of the Australian left would show that an organisation like the BEU was necessary; and furthermore that it ‘ought to be numerically and financially strong enough to combat...the evil teaching of disloyalists, and stem the progress to their goal of Empire disintegration and the

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<sup>195</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 28 March, 6 April 1918.

<sup>196</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1924, p.132. Scott Fell, originally from Glasgow, was a shipowner and later managing director of Maitland Main Collieries. He was a Freemason and a member of the Protestant Federation

(<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/members.nsf/1fb6ebed995667c2ca256ea100825164/c4c1956955dc3b5cca256e29007e31e8!OpenDocument> accessed on 10 March 2008).

<sup>197</sup> Martha Rutledge, ‘Rofe, Thomas Ernest (1869 - 1945)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 11, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne (1988), pp 439-40.

<sup>198</sup> S. Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards (1998), p. 303.

<sup>199</sup> Kwan, ‘National Parliament, National Symbols...’.

destruction of our social, industrial, and political system'.<sup>200</sup> The parent BEU's annual report for 1925 appears to confirm the decline of its Australian affiliate, noting only briefly that it continued to keep in touch with the New South Wales Branch.<sup>201</sup> The organisation was still in existence on the eve of the Second World War, however, campaigning, along with other right-wing and nativist organisations, in support of increased immigration from the UK.<sup>202</sup>

The BEU's affiliate in New Zealand was the Political Reform League, which fought against 'Labour-Socialists in the Dominion [who] are striving to bring about the downfall of sound constitutional Government, and to establish a Soviet form of Government'. This fight was deemed necessary, despite the overwhelming loyalism of the people of New Zealand, because of a 'multiplicity of political parties' which provided a possible electoral advantage to the left. While the League thus concentrated on encouraging 'unity and solidarity among parties opposed to Socialism', it was active in other matters, too, such as support for imperial unity, and opposition to foreign influences in education, the arts, and entertainment.<sup>203</sup> This organisation was formed following correspondence between the secretary of the New Zealand Welfare League and Reginald Wilson of the British BEU in spring 1923 in which it was agreed that their work and methods were very similar.<sup>204</sup>

Beyond the white Dominions, the BEU co-operated with organisations representing British residents in the dependencies and protectorates such as the European

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<sup>200</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1924, p.132.

<sup>201</sup> BEU, *Annual Report 1925*, p. 22.

<sup>202</sup> M. Langfield, 'Voluntarism, Salvation, and Rescue: British Juvenile Migration to Australia and Canada, 1890-1939', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol.32, No.2 (May 2004), p. 114, n. 146.

<sup>203</sup> BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, p. 26; *The Times*, 25 August 1928.

<sup>204</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1923, p. 63.

Association of India and the British Union in Egypt.<sup>205</sup> The British Union had been formed in 1919 as the Non-Official British Community in Cairo, ‘with the object of safeguarding the interests of British residents’. In 1921 it changed its name upon affiliating with the BEU and adopting its policy.<sup>206</sup> The British Union attacked the ‘fallacy’ that the Egyptian people were capable of running their own affairs and called upon the British government to ‘maintain order, not merely to restore it after it has been disturbed’.<sup>207</sup> Following the granting of Egyptian independence in 1922 the Union strove for the protection of British interests within the new nation.<sup>208</sup>

Some historians have tended to be dismissive of the significance of the anti-Bolshevist right. Webber, for instance, appears to regard organisations like the Liberty League – an ephemeral, amateurish, almost comical, enterprise – as representative of all the British anti-Bolshevist groups of the post-war period.<sup>209</sup> This impression can be taken from White, too, who regards the ‘individuals associated with the anti-Bolshevik societies’ as ‘more likely to embarrass their supporters than their opponents’;<sup>210</sup> Certainly, the Liberty League appears to have been a somewhat pompous and particularly hapless outfit; but as the foregoing chapter shows, other anti-Bolshevist organisations existed which were far more successful at ‘doing’ anti-subversion, rather than simply talking about it. At the launch of the Liberty League, a sanguine Henry Rider Haggard

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<sup>205</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1923, p. 85.

<sup>206</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1921, p. 103; *The Times*, 20 December 1921; W. E. Kingsford, *The Egyptian Question*, British Union in Egypt, Cairo (1921). Kingsford was the British Union’s president; its secretary was F. H. Fraser (*Nineteenth Century and After*, Vol. 97 (January-June 1925), pp. 619-20).

<sup>207</sup> *Empire Record*, July 1921, p. 115.

<sup>208</sup> *The Times*, 3 January 1923; *Empire Record*, March 1923, p. 52, 56; BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, p. 27; *ibid*, 1925, p. 22.

<sup>209</sup> Webber, *The Ideology of the British Right*, pp. 65-6; *idem*, ‘Intolerance and discretion: Conservatives and British fascism, 1918-1926’, in T. Kushner and K. Lunn, *Traditions of Intolerance: Historical Perspectives on Fascism and Race Discourse in Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (1989), p. 162.

<sup>210</sup> White, pp. 14-5.

had unveiled its ambitious plans in full public glare along with the ubiquitous appeal for funds:

Apart from our GHQ in London, we must be able to stretch out our arms to the provinces and institute similar bodies there. Literature has to be prepared and distributed, workers and speakers are to be trained, meetings are to be organised, and a special Intelligence Branch has to be maintained. Activities in numerous other directions could be named, while, once successful here, we hope to carry on similar propaganda in the Overseas Empire.<sup>211</sup>

The contrast between the approach of the Liberty League and that of the secretive, heavily-funded and extensively connected National Propaganda/EL, and the organisations under its tutelage – most notably the BEU – could not be more striking. The BEU had a prolific literary output, regularly employed ‘trained speakers’ in working-class areas, organised an ‘Intelligence Branch’, and possessed affiliates in ‘the Overseas Empire’. While figures like Admiral Sir Reginald Hall and Sir George Makgill were busy laying the foundations of an anti-labour network which plagued the left for over seventy years, Rider Haggard closed off his diary in a mood of despondency, describing 1920 as ‘one of the most wretched [years] in our history, more full of doubts and fears than any of those of the war’.<sup>212</sup>

By the mid-1920s the BEU had evolved into the leading anti-communist organisation on the British right. Brown has summarised some of the reasons for this

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<sup>211</sup> *Evening Standard*, 4 March 1920. Quoted in NA CAB 27/84.

<sup>212</sup> Rider Haggard diary, 31 December 1920, p. 211.

success in contrast to the fortunes of the Anti-Socialist Union.<sup>213</sup> With the partial exception of his suggestion that BEU anti-Bolshevist propaganda appealed to the intellect rather than the emotions, it is difficult to find fault in his conclusions. The BEU was a dynamic, well-funded and efficiently organised body. It had important links with a variety of forces in British society which, when combined, gave it a formidable number of avenues for exerting its influence. These included sections of the British secret state, via its connections with Sir George Makgill and Admiral Hall's National Propaganda; a vast array of business backers; the patriotic section of the British labour movement associated with figures like Stanton, Gilmour and Havelock Wilson; and, perhaps most significantly, a large number of Conservative and 'Constitutionalist' politicians in both Houses of Parliament, including government Ministers.

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<sup>213</sup> Brown, pp.255-6.



## Chapter 2

### **The National Citizens' Union: Middle-Class Activism and Anti-Socialism.**

Middle-class discontent played a role in the break-up of the Lloyd George-led Coalition government in October 1922. Although some attention has been given to the role of the anti-socialist right in this process,<sup>214</sup> there remains a dearth of detailed analysis of the part played by the Middle Classes Union (MCU) in these developments. The MCU rebranded itself as the National Citizens' Union (NCU) in January 1922 and achieved prominence as an anti-communist, strike-breaking organisation. This chapter focuses on the manner in which the MCU/NCU channelled middle-class discontent in an anti-socialist, anti-labour direction both during and after the Coalition period.

The post-war period witnessed an acute sense of crisis among the middle class on an international scale. The crisis was symptomatic of the development of large-scale capitalist and state capitalist concerns in certain areas of manufacturing, distribution and retail, a process accelerated and intensified by the war.<sup>215</sup> This was perceived as being responsible for undermining the income and status of the middle class. In Britain massively increased state spending pushed up taxes as a proportion of middle-class income.<sup>216</sup> Much contemporary discourse on this crisis – characterised by graphic descriptions of the plight of the 'New Poor': the 'impoverished middle classes' – exaggerated the extent of financial hardship and ignored wide divergences in middle-

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<sup>214</sup> E. H. H. Green, 'Conservatism, Anti-Socialism, and the End of the Lloyd George Coalition', in idem, *Ideologies of Conservatism...*, pp. 114-34; Cowling, pp. 70-90.

<sup>215</sup> C. S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilisation in France, Germany and Italy in the Decade after World War I*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (1988), p. 591.

<sup>216</sup> A. McDonald, 'The Geddes Committee and the Formulation of Public Expenditure Policy, 1921-1922', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (September 1989), pp. 644-5.

class experience.<sup>217</sup> Behind the hyperbole, however, were some genuine concerns, stemming from a fall in real earnings for certain ‘black-coated’ salaried staff living on fixed incomes, whose pay had often not been increased since 1914 despite considerable rises in the cost of living.<sup>218</sup> More significant in many ways than the fiscal reality was the *perception* among middle-class Britons that their relatively privileged standing in society was under threat, squeezed on the one hand by big business and *nouveau riche* profiteers and, more importantly, on the other by the organised labour movement.<sup>219</sup>

Trade union membership mushroomed during the Great War and its immediate aftermath, and some groups of workers had secured significant pay increases. Willingness to engage in industrial action to safeguard these gains produced a wave of industrial unrest after 1918. In the context of worker insurgency in Europe, this unrest was perceived with deep foreboding by middle-class observers. Furthermore, the extension of the franchise to include all working-class men and large numbers of women raised the spectre of elected socialist administrations – both local and national – committed to ‘confiscatory’ policies of even higher taxation, with middle-class ratepayers and taxpayers bearing the burden of ‘lavish’ expenditure on the welfare of already ‘over-paid’ manual workers and the ‘work-shy’ unemployed. An expression of these anxieties – alongside a plethora of concerned articles in contemporary periodical literature and journalistic exposés in the *Daily Mail* – was the creation of new middle-class pressure groups and the expansion of existing ratepayers’ associations and chambers of commerce. These concerns permeated the anti-socialist right leading directly to the formation of new

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<sup>217</sup> T. Jeffery and K. McClelland, ‘A World Fit to Live in...’, pp. 40-4; R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1998), pp. 50-4.

<sup>218</sup> McDonald, p. 645.

<sup>219</sup> McKibbin, loc. cit.

organisations committed to the militant defence of middle-class interests, the most important of which was the MCU.

The MCU was formed in March 1919, explicitly to fight against socialism and to champion the interests of the middle strata of British society in their alleged hour of need. The organisation's founder and chief organiser until his death in October 1921 was William Kennedy Jones, Conservative MP for Hornsey, and former editor of the *Globe* newspaper.<sup>220</sup> He defined the middle class as

all those unorganised citizens who stand between the organised and federated worker on the one hand and the smaller, but almost equally powerful class, who stand for organised and consolidated Capital on the other. The middle classes are that large body in the nation who work with their heads rather than their hands, and in whom by far the greater part of the national brain is concentrated. They comprise all the professions, learned and otherwise, shopkeepers, and clerks, and those who help to manage industries and businesses of every sort. To these classes belong both the soldier and the sailor, the stockbroker and the clergyman, the barrister and the architect, the grocer and the solicitor, the author of great works and the men and women whose writings are confined to ledgers.<sup>221</sup>

On being asked if the MCU had 'any objection to younger branches of the aristocracy, "who are as poor as church mice", joining the union', Kennedy Jones reputedly replied that the organisation would be glad to welcome any 'impoverished earl' who wished to

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<sup>220</sup> *The Times*, 21 October 1921.

<sup>221</sup> Quoted in A. Gleason, *What the Workers Want: A Study of British Labour*, Allen and Unwin, London (1920), p. 16.

join.<sup>222</sup> Another founding member, Major John Pretyman Newman, Conservative MP for Finchley, reiterated the point, defining the ‘middle class man’ as ‘any person, whether peer or peasant, who is of the opinion that his interest and his liberty are not safeguarded by organised labour on one side or organised capital on the other’.<sup>223</sup> Similarly broad appeals were made in MCU leaflets of the time (Figure 2.1).

The MCU was necessary, Kennedy Jones insisted, to ‘withstand the rapacity of the manual worker and the profiteer’; when combined, the middle class ‘had co-operative powers for their own protection not less potent nor less effective than those possessed by the organised workers’. The new body would campaign, among other things, to ensure that workers liable for income tax were made to pay, and that middle-class tax-payers obtained all the benefits to which they were entitled. While most of the aims of the MCU could be achieved by legislative means, he insisted that the new body would not shy away from its own brand of ‘direct action’ if necessary, such as a ‘fortnight’s abstention from the use of taxi-cabs...or a refusal to use gas for a certain period’.<sup>224</sup>

Indicative of the strength of feeling in support of such views is the fact that the MCU’s public launch meeting at the Cannon Street Hotel, London, proved so popular that police officers had to be employed to turn away hundreds of disappointed late-comers. These were addressed at a hastily organised overflow meeting by Sir Harry Brittain, Conservative MP for Acton. Meanwhile, at the main meeting, speeches from

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> *The Times*, 4 April 1919.

<sup>224</sup> *The Times*, 4 March 1919.

# WHO ARE THE—— ——MIDDLE CLASSES?

THE conventional use of the term "Middle Classes" implies a degree, or many degrees, of social status. Hence, we see it suggested that qualifications for this category range from birth and breeding to bank balances and the use of baths.

The Middle Classes Union is not concerned with social distinctions and does not stand for the propagation of class warfare. What it is concerned with is the interests which exist between Monopoly and Syndicalism. In this sense the Middle Classes are the people with the "Middle Interests."

It is for the individual to determine whether he or she comes within the Middle Classes—as a Consumer, as a Tax-Payer, as a Voter.

Capital is organised. Labour is organised. But in contentions between capital and Labour, the unorganised Middle Classes—those who are the butt, the buffer and the burden bearers—have no *locus standi* and no representation.

Within this body are the Brainworkers—the Commercial and Trading, the Professional and Administrative and Managerial Classes, and those whose income is derived from Pensions or Savings.

The internal interests of a particular profession or business may be served by the professional or business societies; but so far as general political and economic affairs are concerned, those who constitute these bodies, together with the vast mass of the Middle Classes who are altogether unorganised, are incapable, under present conditions, of any power of concerted action.

The M.C.U. exists to weld together those masses of the Middle Classes into a strong practical, co-ordinated entity for the protection of common interests and in defence of national institutions and constitutional forms of Government. It is non-party and non-sectarian. It is open to men and women, and it is for those who believe in the need and the main objects of such an organisation to go into partnership and to formulate such policy and procedure as may be deemed expedient from time to time.

The very existence of a representative and powerful Organisation such as this will produce both a moderating and a stimulating influence in the political and economic life of the nation.

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## Organise! Organise!

**THIS IS YOUR OPPORTUNITY.**

**There is a vital necessity for combination  
Branches are forming throughout the Kingdom**

MINIMUM MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTION 2/6

**Larger Subscriptions and Contributions to the "Propaganda Fund" are earnestly invited**

Address—The General Secretary, The Middle Classes Union.

General Buildings, Aldwych, London, W.C.2.

or to the Hon. Sec. of the Local Branch—

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Printed by J. H. Heath & Sons, 68 Inverness Avenue, Westcliff. Published by  
Capt, Stanley Abbott, Gen. Sec., Middle Classes' Union, General Buildings,  
Aldwych, W.C.2.

Leaflet No 101 /7/19

Figure 2.1. MCU recruiting leaflet (July 1919), author's collection.

Kennedy Jones, Pretymen Newman and Major Marmaduke Lawther were made expounding the views of the MCU on a variety of issues and pointing out the urgent necessity of its establishment. Kennedy Jones claimed that the middle class had contributed disproportionately to Britain's victory in the war in terms of resourcefulness, personnel, money and services; and yet they received none of the spoils of victory, while the unemployed drained the exchequer and 'miners and railwaymen threatened the industrial life of the community'. It was time, he insisted, that 'the middle classes organised themselves in order to ensure that some of the sunshine promised by Mr. Lloyd George should find its way into middle class homes'.<sup>225</sup>

There was much emphasis on the notion of the 'hapless middle class' being crushed between the upper and nether 'millstones' of capital and state bureaucracy on the one hand and organised labour on the other.<sup>226</sup> The point was reiterated a year later in the MCU's monthly magazine, the *New Voice*:

If Labour finds the cost of living going up, it can demand, strike for, and get increased wages to meet the living cost. If the manufacturer finds the increased wages adding to his production costs, he can add to his selling price and 'pass it on to the consumer'. The middle classes pay the wages bill in the price of their coal or their season ticket or their boots or blankets – or their income tax and municipal rates.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> *The Times*, 7 March 1919.

<sup>226</sup> H. Brittain, 'Middle Classes, Mobilise!', *Review of Reviews* (May 1919), p. 317.

<sup>227</sup> *New Voice*, April 1920, p. 5.



The MCU attempted to articulate and promote the interests of the middle classes via a range of activities and campaigns. Within days of the MCU's launch, Kennedy Jones headed a group of sympathetic MPs who moved a series of amendments at the committee stage of the Coalition's Rent Bill, aimed at bringing middle-class tenants within the scope of the proposed legislation. Many of the changes demanded by the MCU lobby were conceded by the government and incorporated into the legislation.<sup>228</sup> On 25 September 1919 the MCU presented evidence to the Royal Commission on Income Tax, arguing that proposals to increase the tax for those on incomes below £2,000 a year would inflict great hardship on the middle class.<sup>229</sup> The MCU organised protest meetings at Westminster, Portsmouth and Glasgow against increased telephone charges in early 1921 and mooted the possibility of a nationwide boycott of telephone services.<sup>230</sup> Other issues the MCU campaigned on were excessive rail fares, laundry prices, and the shortage of affordable domestic servants. In September it advised housewives to 'adopt a sterner tone' with overcharging shopkeepers.<sup>231</sup>

Such activism struck a nerve, leading to the rapid growth of the MCU. As early as May 1919 a correspondent to the *Manchester Guardian* reported the membership to be around 147,000.<sup>232</sup> By 1920 the organisation had around 250-300 branches, a number of which claimed substantial memberships.<sup>233</sup> In May 1920 the *New Voice* suggested that in spite of this growth 'until its membership passes the million mark it remains merely [a] nucleus, for the potential membership runs into eight figures, not only seven'.<sup>234</sup> At a

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<sup>228</sup> *The Times*, 10 March 1919.

<sup>229</sup> 1919 Royal Commission on the Income Tax, CMD, 288, i-viii, pp. 696-703.

<sup>230</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 9, 10, 14 January 1921.

<sup>231</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 8 September 1921.

<sup>232</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 20 May 1919.

<sup>233</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, pp. 11-12; June 1920, pp. 13-14.

<sup>234</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 3.

meeting of Shrewsbury MCU in December, the Chairman, R. D. Thomson, 'said the branch had a membership of three or four hundred, but without any very great effort he thought their numbers might be increased to three or four thousand'.<sup>235</sup> The optimism of such aspirations was dampened by Lord Askwith in June 1921, when he pointed out that of the MCU's 300 branches only a small minority existed in Scotland and the North of England.<sup>236</sup>

A major focus of MCU activity was opposition to excessive government expenditure, which was regarded as taking the nation in a socialist direction. Andrew McDonald notes that an 'intense politicisation of public expenditure policy' developed after the war. In 1919 over three times more people were liable for income tax than in 1913, providing 'a large potential constituency' for any campaign to curtail government spending.<sup>237</sup> Wartime subsidies, which had extended into peacetime leading to the virtual nationalisation of the railways and coal mining, were vehemently opposed by MCU parliamentarians, who campaigned for immediate decontrol of the affected industries.<sup>238</sup> Other targets were large-scale capital spending plans drawn up to honour election pledges of 'Reconstruction' and 'Homes for Heroes'. In July 1920 a group of Conservative politicians, industrialists and bankers, including the MCU President, Lord Askwith, and another prominent MCU member, Godfrey Locker-Lampson, Unionist MP for Wood Green, issued a public appeal against the government's 'policy of prodigality'. They sought to mobilise public anger on the subject to force a reversal of such 'spendthrift'

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<sup>235</sup> *Wellington Journal*, 11 December 1920.

<sup>236</sup> *The Times*, 25 June 1921.

<sup>237</sup> McDonald, pp. 644-5.

<sup>238</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 4.



policies.<sup>239</sup> A committee set up by some of the signatories went on to become the People's Union for Economy (PUE), a 'respectable' adjunct to a growing public and press movement against 'waste'.<sup>240</sup> Much of the day-to-day organising of the PUE fell to Locker-Lampson, who later became its joint Honorary Secretary, alongside Oswald Mosley, at that time Coalition Unionist MP for Harrow.<sup>241</sup>

The Coalition Liberal Health Minister, Dr. Christopher Addison, bore the brunt of MCU attacks on government policy. He came to symbolise everything wrong with the government in the eyes of the anti-socialist right, which regarded his social reform policies as a 'dangerous extension of war socialism and a new plunge into subsidised egalitarianism'.<sup>242</sup> In October 1920 MCU members in the Commons opposed the Health Ministry's Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 'in view of the present state of the national finances'.<sup>243</sup> Addison was eventually hounded from office on 31 March 1921 in an atmosphere largely created by the combined efforts of the MCU and the PUE.<sup>244</sup>

Public anger over 'Squandermania' had coalesced in January 1921 into the Anti-Waste League (AWL). Its campaign of 1921-2 against excessive government expenditure played a part in forcing Lloyd George to abandon reconstruction in favour of retrenchment and contributed to the erosion of Conservative Party commitment to the Coalition. Within the anti-waste milieu, the MCU played an important role; both in pushing the anti-waste message and in ensuring that anti-socialism remained at its core. Many of the themes of the anti-waste agitation were those on which the MCU had

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<sup>239</sup> *The Times*, 16 July 1920.

<sup>240</sup> Cowling, p. 74.

<sup>241</sup> *The Times*, 4 August, 28 October 1920.

<sup>242</sup> K. O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition Government 1918-1922*, Clarendon, Oxford (1979), p. 89.

<sup>243</sup> *The Times*, 27 Oct 1920.

<sup>244</sup> Green, 'Conservatism, Anti-Socialism...', p. 125; S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, Vol. 2, University of North Carolina Press, London (1981), p. 377.

campaigned over the preceding two years. Indeed, the organisation can quite justifiably be described as the pioneer of the kind of consumer-oriented style of campaigning the AWL thrived on during its short-lived existence. The AWL's great advantage was the financial and propaganda backing it received from the Northcliffe- and Rothermere-owned press. While warm expressions of sympathy and solidarity for the MCU had been forthcoming in newspapers like the *Daily Mail* during 1919-20,<sup>245</sup> large-scale financial backing had not. The personal involvement of Lord Rothermere in the AWL provided it with an enormous boost, enabling it to finance a number of Independent candidates in parliamentary by-elections.

The MCU had supported a number of Independent anti-waste candidates before the formation of the AWL. At Manchester Rusholme in October 1919, the MCU supported a National Party candidate who only garnered 815 votes, losing his deposit. The MCU based its endorsement on candidates' responses to a questionnaire drawn up by members in the constituency.<sup>246</sup> At the Wrekin by-election in January 1920 MCU member and anti-waste campaigner, Charles Palmer, took the seat as an Independent in a three-way contest against Labour and a Coalition Liberal.<sup>247</sup> At Dartford in March 1920 the MCU backed the National Party candidate, Colonel R. V. K. Applin, in a five-way battle which included two Independent challengers from the right. Applin's campaign launch was addressed by MCU Vice-President, Lady Askwith.<sup>248</sup> The right-wing vote split three ways, with Labour gaining a majority of over nine thousand, highlighting the risks involved in dissipating the anti-socialist vote.

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<sup>245</sup> Jeffery and McClelland, p. 44.

<sup>246</sup> *Scotsman*, 30 September 1919.

<sup>247</sup> *Wellington Journal*, 17 January 1920; *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 3.

<sup>248</sup> *The Times*, 15 March 1920.

During the Ilford by-election the following September the Executive Committee of the local branch of the MCU invited its Chairman, Lionel Yexley, to stand as a candidate against Frederic Wise, the Coalition Unionist.<sup>249</sup> A general meeting of the branch endorsed this by a small majority; but due to the narrow margin Yexley did not feel justified in standing and withdrew his candidature.<sup>250</sup> Wise faced no independent challenge and was elected with a comfortable majority. By the summer of 1923, he was a member of the NCU Parliamentary Committee.<sup>251</sup>

A second by-election was held in the Wrekin constituency in November 1920 following Palmer's death. Another Independent, Colonel Sir Charles Townshend, was selected to fight the seat. This time the local Conservative Association, which had endorsed the Coalition Liberal in January, withdrew their candidate – a former National Party supporter – and backed Townshend.<sup>252</sup> The ensuing straight fight with Labour saw the Independent returned for the Wrekin with a much increased majority. The Wellington branch of the MCU, meeting a month after the election, welcomed Townshend's victory and attacked the Conservative's participation in the Coalition government. Colonel Percy Ashford, an MCU national organiser, said that he was delighted with the result, going on to argue that:

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<sup>249</sup> *The Times*, 26 August 1920.

<sup>250</sup> *The Times*, 31 August 1920.

<sup>251</sup> *New Voice*, July 1923, p. 6.

<sup>252</sup> J. W. B. Bates, *The Conservative Party in the Constituencies 1918-1939*, DPhil thesis, University of Oxford (1994), p. 41.

Party politics today were no good. Did anybody know what a Conservative was? He did not. If the Conservatives represented the Government he saw nothing they had conserved; they had committed extravagant waste.<sup>253</sup>

At Dover in January 1921 the MCU supported the official Anti-Waste League candidate, Sir Thomas Polson, against J. J. Astor, the Coalition Unionist. Polson, a 'life-long Unionist', was also 'tired...of the Unionist Party acting as the dog to Mr. Lloyd George's tail'. He felt that the Conservatives were 'strong enough in Parliament to stop extravagance and waste, but they had done nothing in that direction'.<sup>254</sup> Polson's subsequent victory sent shock waves through Conservative circles, as did that of the MCU-backed AWL candidate at Westminster St Georges, J. M. M. Erskine.<sup>255</sup> At West Lewisham in September 1921 the MCU again supported an AWL candidate, Lieutenant-Commander W. G. Windham. This was despite the fact that the official Conservative was also standing on an anti-waste programme and, like Windham, was a member of the MCU.<sup>256</sup> Stanley Abbott, the organisation's General Secretary, stated that the MCU Central Executive had discussed the matter and was satisfied that the 'overwhelming majority' of local branch members favoured Windham, who upheld MCU policy in 'every respect'.<sup>257</sup> At Southwark South East in December 1921 the local Conservative Association voted unanimously to support the Coalition Liberal candidate, Jacobsen.<sup>258</sup> The AWL and the MCU, however, sent speakers and other election workers to the district

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<sup>253</sup> *Wellington Journal*, 11 Dec 1920.

<sup>254</sup> *The Times*, 16, 21 December 1920; 6, 10, 11 January 1921.

<sup>255</sup> *The Times*, 10 June 1921; Bates, p. 42.

<sup>256</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 30 August 1921.

<sup>257</sup> *The Times*, 7 September 1921.

<sup>258</sup> *The Times*, 29 November 1921.

to support Horace Boot, the 'Independent Conservative and anti-waste' candidate.<sup>259</sup> As in Dartford this had the effect of splitting the anti-socialist vote, handing Labour victory.

On other occasions the MCU supported official Coalition Unionist candidates. At Bedford in April 1921, however, the local MCU branch, which claimed a 'considerable membership', supported the Coalition Liberal Postmaster-General, Frederick Kellaway, in a straight fight against Labour. MCU support, due fundamentally to the fact that Kellaway was 'not Labour', also rested on his claim to be 'a ruthless enemy of waste in every form of public expenditure', and his pledge that the Post Office 'must be made self-supporting'.<sup>260</sup> Later that year at Hornsey the MCU was unable to choose between the Unionist or Liberal candidates because their answers to its questionnaire were equally satisfactory.<sup>261</sup>

MCU support for candidates opposed to Unionists or their officially endorsed Coalition partners, lent weight to the organisation's 'non-party' credentials. Ultimately, however, such support was predicated on the notion that the candidates were the best means of fighting the menace of socialism. They represented the 'real Conservatism' of the party grass roots, which had been abandoned by an effete party leadership mesmerised by Lloyd George. Although the by-elections presented rather a mixed-bag in terms of their outcomes, and did little *initially* to shake the Conservative leadership's commitment to the Coalition, the anti-waste agitation was viewed by dissidents as evidence that right-wing, anti-Coalition candidates could be successful, without allowing Labour in through splitting the anti-socialist vote on most occasions. This eroded the myth that Lloyd George was an indispensable electoral ally for the party. The actions of

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<sup>259</sup> *The Times*, 2, 6 December 1921.

<sup>260</sup> *The Times*, 16 April 1921.

<sup>261</sup> *New Voice*, December 1921, p. 15.

the MCU contributed to a crisis of identity within the Conservative Party, culminating in a 'revolt of the constituencies', which ate away at Conservative support for Lloyd George.<sup>262</sup> Conservative loyalists became concerned that the party was losing support whilst other right-wing forces were reaping the benefits of middle-class anger over waste and socialism. As early as 1919 some Conservative activists had warned the party not to turn its back on their core middle-class supporters lest they might turn in their alienation to independent forces on the right. By 1921 such a process appeared to be in full swing; Bates points to the example of Reading, where the MCU claimed a membership of 1,154, compared to the Conservative Association's 250. Although some activists expressed anger at the new organisations stealing the Conservatives' clothes, most tried to emulate their success and agitated for a break with Lloyd George.<sup>263</sup>

Significantly, much MCU propaganda over the issue of waste railed against expenditure designed specifically to safeguard the jobs and improve the lives of Britain's working-class majority. Pretyman Newman welcomed Addison's dismissal by insisting that the first task of his successor was to 'halt...the construction of uneconomic dwellings for the working classes'.<sup>264</sup> The MCU utilised its parliamentary influence to derail a private member's Bill tabled on behalf of Durham County Council, which wished to 'run a system of tramways and motor buses all over the country at an estimated capital cost of £1,600,000, and with no prospect that the ratepayer would ever see a half-penny of profit on his gigantic outlay'. On hearing of this, County Durham branches of the MCU 'sent out an SOS', and the organisation's London headquarters 'brought to bear all pressure

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<sup>262</sup> Bates, pp. 42-3. Green, p. 124.

<sup>263</sup> Bates, pp. 22-5.

<sup>264</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 4.

available', with the result that the 'champions of spending' were defeated by a Commons majority of over eighty.<sup>265</sup>

The MCU was a trenchant opponent of increased education expenditure. In April 1920, Thomas Copp, Honorary Secretary of Putney, Roehampton and Southfields Branch, lashed out at the 'thousands who receive income and benefit by free education, modern drainage and other items paid for out of the rates and who contribute nothing themselves, as they are not assessed'. He was angered that 'the labouring class...have their children educated, if not clothed and fed, out of the rates'. In contrast:

The middle class man does not care to live on charity nor send his children to the board schools; seldom does he throw himself on the poor rate or trouble the police. He is the law-abiding, respectable man who pays his way and who through not complaining or standing up for his rights is being imposed upon every day.<sup>266</sup>

A 1922 pamphlet published by the Scottish Council of the NCU attacked Labour education policies as 'extravagant and needless expenditure'. It reveals a certain disdain for the aspirations of the working class, suggesting Labour believed that:

by lavishing money on schools and teaching it could make all the sow's ears of the country into silk purses...its policy was to relieve the 'worker' from the

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> T. S. Copp, *The Middle Classes and their Unfair Share of the Burden of the Rates*, London Committee of the Middle Classes Union, London (May 1920), pp. 2-4.

necessity of supporting his own children, and to have these children clothed and fed, as well as educated at other people's expense.<sup>267</sup>

MCU/NCU campaigning on this issue brought it into direct conflict with the Coalition Liberal Education Minister, H. A. L. Fisher. Responding to the attacks of the anti-waste lobby Fisher stated that 'when he read the manifesto issued by the Middle Class Union [sic] deprecating the expenditure on education he wondered whether the signatories were aware how much benefit their own class was deriving from the system they were so anxious to curtail'. He went on to ask the newspaper owners who backed the MCU if they had 'ever reflected what the circulation of their newspapers would be if there was nobody in the country able to read them'. Fisher's impeccable logic seems to have cut little ice with the MCU, however.<sup>268</sup>

Occasionally the message of class neutrality was still professed by MCU/NCU supporters. A letter to the *New Voice* in April 1924 stated that the British people were 'just as much opposed to the Junkerism of a section of the Tory Party, as they are to Socialism'. It went on to call for a 'new party whose motto should be "Fair play for both Capital and Labour, and robbery by neither"'.<sup>269</sup> At a meeting of the Windsor and Eton NCU branch, Councillor Robert Campbell said the organisation 'had to hold the balance between employer and employed', and ensure that each treated the other with fairness. Despite this stance Campbell felt moved to attack the spirit of dependency which was allegedly afflicting the nation in terms which left little doubt as to his class prejudices:

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<sup>267</sup> G. Eyre-Todd, *'Mobocracy' Or, Towards the Abyss*, Scottish Council, National Citizens' Union, Glasgow (1922), p. 33.

<sup>268</sup> *The Times*, 8 January 1921.

<sup>269</sup> *New Voice*, April 1924, p. 7.



There was a spirit today that the State had to feed, clothe and educate the people, and personal responsibility...had been thrown on one side. The majority of people were content to allow other people to look after their offspring and neglect their own responsibility. They were now told that houses were not for the middle classes, but for the poor working classes.<sup>270</sup>

In the context of post-war industrial unrest and the threat of Bolshevism, the notion that the MCU/NCU occupied a neutral position between the interests of capital and labour came under intense strain. Generally, little encouragement was necessary for the MCU to come down on the side of capitalism. In May 1920 the *New Voice* reacted to the taunt of a British 'advocate of Bolshevism' that MCU members would have to 'behave themselves' in the future if they did not want to share the bloody fate of Russian anti-Bolshevists, by stating:

It is no use camouflaging the position by speaking of elimination of class hatred.... The class hatred already exists in its most virulent form; the party which proposes the establishment of a communistic state is steadily and skilfully attracting toward itself the ignorant sections of the community who are deluded by specious promises and by one-sided statements of the case...they misstate the aims of Capital in this country; they exaggerate the grievances of the working classes.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>271</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 3.

From its inception, the MCU regarded socialism as wholly inimical to the interests of the middle class. Accordingly, MCU propaganda attacked socialism relentlessly, while its criticisms of capitalism and big-business were mild and muted in comparison. In its 'Manifesto to the Middle Classes' published in May 1919 the MCU described how '[u]nder circumstances of unimaginable horror' the middle classes had been destroyed in Russia. Its goal was to prevent such a catastrophe from ever occurring in Britain:

If no other reason existed than that of effectively opposing by propaganda, lectures and co-ordinated resistance the foul doctrine of Bolshevism, which aims at the destruction of our social system and is the negation of religion itself, surely here is a claim for concerted effort which no right-thinking man or woman will be found to ignore.<sup>272</sup>

At a meeting later that month, at the Houldsworth Hall, Manchester, Pretyman Newman emphasised the MCU's opposition to 'the fatal doctrine of Bolshevism which...aims not only at the destruction of the middle classes but of civilisation, and is the negation of religion'.<sup>273</sup> In July an MCU leaflet viewed 'with great alarm the Government apathy in the face of Bolshevism and the constant threats of revolutionists'. One of the organisation's six objects at the time was 'To resist the growing menace of BOLSHEVISM which is insidiously invading this country'.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> *The Times*, 10 May 1919.

<sup>273</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 21 May 1919.

<sup>274</sup> MCU, untitled promotional leaflet (n. d. [July 1919]), Cumbria Record Office (Whitehaven), DWM 7/86.

At a meeting at London's Mansion House to mark the first anniversary of the MCU's foundation the number and passion of speeches on the 'menace of Bolshevism' prompted one journalist to suggest that this aspect of the Union's work represented its 'most important immediate business'.<sup>275</sup> Soon after, the MCU began publication of its monthly magazine, the *New Voice*. The first edition carried an editorial under the title 'A Call to Action', which laments the 'drift towards communism in this country, evidenced by the clamour for nationalisation'. It describes the audacity of British advocates of Bolshevism who 'made no attempt to deny the atrocities committed in Russia by the Bolsheviks'. Such people are described as 'that section of the community which the Middle Classes Union exists to fight'. The left wing of the Labour Party is accused of 'persisting in a policy of Bolshevised communism – the negation of constitutional government'. After a description of the despoliation of Russia under Bolshevik rule, the editorial attempts to justify the existence of the MCU, suggesting that it regarded itself as more than simply another anti-Bolshevist propaganda society:

It is virtually useless attempting to convince the deluded followers of our communists by truths of this nature. The only possible effective action consists in organisation of the middle classes of the country into a body of such strength as could be capable of defending itself against the revolutionary element.

The MCU claimed to be the nucleus of such an organisation. It was 'not a matter of verbiage, but of practical work for the benefit of those whom it represents'. Despite

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<sup>275</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 6 March 1920.

claiming a six-figure membership, the editorial stresses that far more recruits were necessary for the MCU to decisively counter the Bolshevist threat:

[This] danger...can only be met and countered by organisation, by work in their own interests by the spreading of counter-propaganda and the enrolment of recruits in the only force which has achieved persistent and effective action against the doctrine of communism – or Bolshevism, or nationalisation, or any other name by which this anarchy may be camouflaged.<sup>276</sup>

In September 1920 the *New Voice* endorsed the call of Pretyman Newman for a ‘Middle Classes Internationale’, to meet Bolshevism head-on throughout the world.<sup>277</sup>

The recasting of the MCU as the NCU heralded a greatly increased emphasis on anti-communist propaganda and activity. At a meeting of the NCU Grand Council on 13 December 1922, delegates resolved that ‘as a main point of policy the Union should set itself out to fight the spread of communism throughout the country’.<sup>278</sup> The NCU was ‘urged...to suspend the consideration of all minor questions...until a campaign giving effect to the major policy has been planned and inaugurated’.<sup>279</sup> Consequently, NCU speakers embarked on a ‘Magnificent Tour’ of northern England to spread this anti-communist message. The ‘insidious’ nature of communism was attacked by Lady Askwith at Durham; while it was described as a ‘malignant disease of the body politic’

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<sup>276</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 3.

<sup>277</sup> *New Voice*, September 1920, p. 5, pp. 8-9

<sup>278</sup> *Scotsman*, 14 December 1922.

<sup>279</sup> *New Voice*, January 1923, pp. 8-9.

by Councillor Humphries at York.<sup>280</sup> The *New Voice* carried a series of articles outlining the Communist ‘Plot against England’, which drew heavily on the conspiracy theories of Nesta Webster.<sup>281</sup> In spring 1924 the NCU formally agreed to work with the Central Council of Economic Leagues in its fight to uproot communist subversion.<sup>282</sup> An open-air campaign against ‘Socialism and Communism’ was organised by the NCU in summer 1924, during which meetings were held at Bristol, Leicester, Wolverhampton, Knaresborough, Farnham, and Southport.<sup>283</sup> In 1925 Edinburgh NCU branch embarked on a similar campaign ‘to conduct educational work against Socialism and Communism, and for the promotion of industrial peace’.<sup>284</sup> As with the BEU, meetings were often scheduled to clash in time and place with Communist and Labour gatherings; though there do not appear to have been as many violent confrontations. It continued to attack Communist ‘infiltration’ throughout 1924-5; calling on the government to “‘poke out the nests and block up the holes” of the Communist rodents who are eating into the foundations of our national stability’.<sup>285</sup>

The MCU/NCU was also intimately involved in the campaign against Communist and Proletarian Sunday Schools. It first drew attention to the issue in October 1920 in an article entitled ‘Seducing the Children’, referring to the Bolshevist indoctrination of school children in Battersea (Figure 2.2). A 1922 *New Voice* article attacking Proletarian Sunday Schools was subsequently issued as a leaflet, in which the NCU stressed the accuracy ‘in every detail’ of its coverage of the matter, pointing out that ‘infinite care and

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<sup>280</sup> *New Voice*, November 1923, p. 8.

<sup>281</sup> *New Voice*, March 1924, p. 2; April 1924, p. 6; May 1924, p. 8.

<sup>282</sup> *New Voice*, March 1924, p. 9.

<sup>283</sup> *New Voice*, June 1924, p. 7.

<sup>284</sup> *New Voice*, June 1925, p. 10.

<sup>285</sup> *New Voice*, June 1925, p. 5; July 1925, p. 12.

research were taken before presenting the facts'.<sup>286</sup> This leaflet was superseded in March 1923 by a booklet entitled *The Red Peril to Children*, which was described as the 'best record published to date' on the schools.<sup>287</sup> Like the BEU, the NCU sought to enlist the support of churchmen for its campaign against the schools.<sup>288</sup>

**SEDUCING THE CHILDREN.**

"The King no better than anybody else."

A correspondent sends us a photograph, which we have reproduced, with the following letter:—

"I enclose a reproduction of a photograph of school children in Battersea, dressed in red caps of Liberty and red sashes of freedom. They are taught to sing 'God Save the People,' and if asked why they do not sing 'God Save the King,' reply 'Who is the King? He is no better than anybody else.'"

"These children and their parents are asked to free teas where they have lectures on the wonderful new world which the Bolsheviks will give them. This kind of thing is spreading all over the country. Details as to the exact school are not available. I hope it may be possible to publish the photograph in the *NEW VOICE*."




Figure 2.2. *New Voice*, October 1920, p. 5.

During the general election campaign of November 1922 the NCU demanded 'the suppression of proletarian or "Red" Sunday schools'.<sup>289</sup> As a practical step towards achieving this goal the MCU asked all its branches to prepare petitions urging support of

<sup>286</sup> *New Voice*, January 1923, p. 15.

<sup>287</sup> *New Voice*, March 1923, p. 4.

<sup>288</sup> *New Voice*, June 1925, p. 8.

<sup>289</sup> *The Times*, 8 November 1922.

Sir John Butcher's Bill for the suppression of seditious teaching.<sup>290</sup> In January 1923 the *New Voice* instructed branches on how to organise the petition campaign and render it as effective as possible. In early February *The Times* printed an editorial attacking the schools and endorsing a resolution passed at a meeting in Stratford-on-Avon calling on the government to take action.<sup>291</sup> Subsequent letters to the newspaper pointed out that the meeting in question had been organised by the NCU and that, along with the BEU, the organisation was leading the campaign against the schools.<sup>292</sup> In March the *New Voice* stressed that 'apart from any legislation the country must be roused to private action against the evil by all peaceful means, and by education and counter-propaganda to expose its evil tendency'.<sup>293</sup> At a meeting of Edinburgh NCU branch in February 1924, the prominent British Fascist, Mrs Hamilton More Nisbett, spoke against the schools' 'pernicious teachings' and appealed to her audience to 'work in the cause of the Union in its campaign against the spread of Communism in the country'.<sup>294</sup> At the height of the petition campaign it was claimed that publicity alone had caused 'several schools' to close; and that in one case, due entirely to the NCU's campaigning, a school was closed when the local Labour candidate 'found that he was losing so much ground by the fact that the school was housed on the premises of the Labour Party, that he threatened to retire if the school remained'.<sup>295</sup>

Understandably, socialists were quick to point out the lack of even-handedness in much MCU/NCU propaganda. G. D. H. Cole described the MCU as 'directed in theory

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<sup>290</sup> *New Voice*, January 1923, p. 9.

<sup>291</sup> *The Times*, 1 February 1923.

<sup>292</sup> *The Times*, 2-3 February 1923.

<sup>293</sup> *New Voice*, March 1923, p. 4.

<sup>294</sup> *Scotsman*, 9 February 1924.

<sup>295</sup> *New Voice*, January 1923, p. 15.

against both the manual workers and the representatives of big business, but in practice operating largely as an auxiliary of the richer classes in the community against the manual workers'.<sup>296</sup> A 1920 Independent Labour Party pamphlet described the MCU as 'a blackleg corps for fighting organised Labour, inspired and supported by Big Capital, though recruited mainly from the hirelings and hangers-on of capitalism'. The evidence upon which such accusations were made centred on the extensive business interests of leading MCU members;<sup>297</sup> and the fact that most of the ire of the organisation was targeted at the left and the wider labour movement. Most significantly, the organisation was widely involved in strike-breaking during industrial disputes.

The anti-socialist right perceived strikes as part of a plot to paralyse the nation and usher in a Bolshevist uprising. Such thinking played a part in the development of a government administered civilian strike-breaking body, the Supply and Transport Organisation (STO), from 1919 onwards.<sup>298</sup> The MCU/NCU, along with other bodies like National Propaganda provided physical assistance to the government during a number of disputes at this time. From its inception the MCU regarded a commitment to preserving services in an emergency as a vital aspect of its avowed aim to protect the 'middle interests'; and claimed that it could 'prevent any section of the community from endangering the country by holding up National industries'.<sup>299</sup> Furthermore, through marshalling voluntary labour in an emergency, it would be able to 'stem the flow of

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<sup>296</sup> G. D. H. Cole, 'Non-Manual Trade Unionism', *North American Review*, Vol. 215 (January-June 1922), p. 43.

<sup>297</sup> ILP, *Who Pays...*, pp.7-9.

<sup>298</sup> K. Jeffery and P. Hennessy, *States of Emergency: British Governments and Strikebreaking since 1919*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London (1983), pp. 1-39; R. H. Desmarais, 'The British government's strikebreaking organisation and Black Friday', *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 6, No. 2 (April, 1971), pp. 112-127; idem, 'Lloyd George and the Development of the British Government's Strikebreaking Organisation', *International Review of Social History*, 20 (1975), p. 1-15.

<sup>299</sup> MCU, untitled promotional leaflet (n. d. [July 1919]), Cumbria Record Office, (Whitehaven), DWM 7/86.



Bolshevism in this country', 'prevent the disaster of Nationalisation', and 'counteract the destructive effect of national or sectional strikes far more effectively than by the use either of Military or Police'. This was to be done by 'organis[ing] the mass of tax-paying and rate-paying citizens for self-defence in the event of lightning strikes, by placing them in a position to maintain essential public utility services, e.g., transport, supply of food, heating, lighting, etc'.<sup>300</sup> On joining the organisation, new members were requested to report to their nearest MCU office where 'all one's capabilities and possible activities for the union' were card indexed in readiness for any 'emergency'.<sup>301</sup>

In August 1919 the MCU intervened in a sanitation workers' strike in the London borough of Kensington, during which it received 'many applications...for jobs as street cleaners and van men'. Following the collapse of the strike, the Mayor of Kensington, Sir William Davison (Unionist MP for the area and himself a founding member of the MCU), retained some of the volunteer workers on a permanent basis, insisting that strikers would only be allowed to return to work on the condition that they worked amicably with them.<sup>302</sup> Paddington Borough Council was also affected by the dispute. There, too, the MCU claimed that its volunteers were at the forefront of efforts to maintain services in the district.<sup>303</sup>

The first major test of the MCU's efficacy in this regard came during the national railway strike of autumn 1919. On 26 September every MCU branch in the country was 'requested by telegram to mobilise its registered volunteer workers to assist transport

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<sup>300</sup> MCU, *The Middle Classes Union: What it is. Why it is Necessary. What it has Done and Can Do* (n. d. [1920]), Modern Records Centre, Warwick, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation archive, MSS.36/A24/1.

See also ILP, *Who Pays...*, p. 8

<sup>301</sup> R. Boulton, 'British Middle Classes Union as an Active Force', *New York Times*, 25 January 1920. Before moving to the USA at the end of 1919, Boulton was a member of the MCU. Most of the material in the article is taken from an interim report of the Union in his possession.

<sup>302</sup> *The Times*, 9 August 1919.

<sup>303</sup> Boulton, loc. cit.

work for the local Food Committee'.<sup>304</sup> The order received an enthusiastic response. The Bath branch, for instance, despite having only been formed on 22 September, set up a 'register of voluntary assistance' which was 'warmly patronised by the branch', allowing it to perform 'useful work' in the strike.<sup>305</sup> Despite such efforts, the rail stoppage immediately caused large-scale disruption, and as a result was settled relatively quickly on 5 October, following negotiations which addressed many of the workers' concerns.<sup>306</sup> From the MCU perspective, however, it was primarily the activities of its volunteers which had 'saved the nation' from starvation and brought the railwaymen to their senses:

the MCU rendered the most valuable and immediate services, and was not a small factor in breaking the strike. Many branches organised motor car and passenger services. Hospitality was given by some branches for the accommodation of members unable to travel. Many members were employed in working for the railway service, and in some instances whole trains – drivers, firemen, guards – were completely manned by MCU members.<sup>307</sup>

It was reported that lists of volunteers compiled by the MCU proved helpful to the government in dealing with technical jobs such as electricity supply. It was claimed that although such jobs were usually the preserve of skilled workmen, they could 'be looked after just as well by high-grade electrical engineers and electrical students'.<sup>308</sup> Such

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<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 11.

<sup>306</sup> K. Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System since 1911*, André Deutsch, London (1979), p. 150; W. S. Adams, 'Lloyd George and the Labour Movement', *Past and Present*, No. 3 (November 1953), p. 64, n. 35.

<sup>307</sup> Boulton, loc. cit.

<sup>308</sup> *New York Times*, 30 September 1919.

accounts coincide with evidence of a large public response to the appeals of the government for volunteers.<sup>309</sup> Not all of this voluntary effort was attributable to the MCU, however; and other evidence suggests that the response was not as overwhelming as initially claimed. Once the strike was under way the government itself, via its Strike Committee,<sup>310</sup> made a direct appeal to the populace through large advertisements in the press with headings such as ‘Fight for the Life of the Community. How Every Citizen can Help’.<sup>311</sup> Jeffery and Hennessy suggest that, at least with regard to special constables, the response to this appeal was ‘disappointing’. According to official figures some 6,000 people volunteered overall, of which around 4,000 were actually used, figures dwarfed by the 23,000 soldiers deployed during the strike, and the further 30,000 held in reserve.<sup>312</sup> It must be assumed that those volunteers recruited by the MCU made up only a portion of this ‘relatively small’ body, rendering the claim that the organisation ‘broke’ single-handedly a strike in an industry employing over half a million workers somewhat untenable.

The MCU intervened in a number of smaller disputes during 1920, in which the organisation’s relatively greater weight in some localities may have generated more impact. Finchley MCU members were among 50 volunteers partly responsible for maintaining the supply of gas during an unofficial dispute at the North Middlesex Gas Company’s works at Mill Hill in February; and the organisation provided ‘some five to six hundred volunteers...during a strike in Southampton in May’,<sup>313</sup> The MCU offered to

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<sup>309</sup> *The Times*, 29 September 1919

<sup>310</sup> The Strike Committee was a cabinet sub-committee. After the rail strike it was renamed the Supply and Transport Committee. This body co-ordinated the activities of the STO.

<sup>311</sup> *The Times*, 30 September 1919.

<sup>312</sup> Jeffery and Hennessy, pp. 17-18.

<sup>313</sup> MCU, *The Middle Classes Union...*; *The Times* 5 February 1920.

supply 'one hundred qualified engineers...to maintain the Electricity supply in Sheffield, and thus averted a threatened strike'.<sup>314</sup> In May 1921 the *New Voice* reported that:

Both as a whole and by individual branches has much useful work been done in this connection. In some cases the effect of unauthorised strikes has been rendered nugatory by branch action, and in others strikes have been prevented by the promptitude with which volunteers were available in the event of need.<sup>315</sup>

Preparedness for potential disputes was widely encouraged. At the 1920 annual meeting of the Wolverhampton branch of the MCU the chairman, Mr A. H. Angus, praised the use made of 'Personal Service Forms' pledging help in the event of a national emergency. He pointed out that 'under present unsettled conditions no one could tell when a strike might occur. If the members of the MCU were ready to step into the breach and prevent a national hold-up, the Middle Classes generally would benefit'.<sup>316</sup> A year later, with the experience of the short-lived 'Council of Action' crisis and a threatened general strike by the Triple Alliance behind it, the MCU nationally stressed 'the importance of the preventative nature of our work, and its value as a deterrent against the actions of extremists'.<sup>317</sup>

Of these crises, that precipitated by the government's decision to decontrol the coal industry, culminating in the union climb-down subsequently known as 'Black

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<sup>314</sup> *New Voice*, June 1920, p. 13; R. C. Feld, 'British Ways with the Middle Classes Union', *New York Times*, 3 July 1921.

<sup>315</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 8.

<sup>316</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 12.

<sup>317</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 8.

Friday' in April 1921, was the most serious.<sup>318</sup> As it developed on 4 April the MCU leadership mobilised its '280 Branches throughout the kingdom'; it placed an appeal for volunteers in the national press; and 'was immediately in touch with Government Departments and other responsible authorities'.<sup>319</sup> By 14 April, the day before Black Friday, the MCU claimed that it was able to offer 'facilities for dealing with every kind of volunteer for strike service'.<sup>320</sup> Two days later, however, the STO was officially instructed 'to demobilise that portion of its organisation which had been put into force to meet the Transport strike', in the wake of the collapse of solidarity action.<sup>321</sup>

The MCU was left to ponder what might have been had the strike proceeded. Lord Askwith, the organisation's President, later stated that 'We recruited hundreds of men to assist the Government to provide coal and food to the cities and outlying districts; we provided constables to guard the railway stations; we supplied workers to run the milk trains.... To relieve those who had gone on duty immediately the strike was called, a summons was sent out for an additional force. By the end of the day 2,000 men had answered it'.<sup>322</sup> MCU branches set up the local components of this nationwide strike-breaking strategy. In Camberley, for example, the MCU ensured that 'complete arrangements were made to carry on the public services; an office had been arranged for, volunteers were ready for action, and motors and other vehicles all in readiness'.<sup>323</sup> While the focus of the MCU volunteer effort was on transportation and 'protection', there were some attempts at direct intervention in the coal dispute. In the Lanarkshire coalfield, for

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<sup>318</sup> Jeffery and Hennessy, pp. 58-66.

<sup>319</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p.11.

<sup>320</sup> *The Times*, 14 April 1921. A special appeal was made to women on behalf of the MCU by Lady Askwith (*Scotsman* 9 April 1921).

<sup>321</sup> Jeffery and Hennessy, p. 63.

<sup>322</sup> Quoted in Feld, loc. cit.

<sup>323</sup> *New Voice*, April 1923, p. 10.

example, MCU volunteers, including a number of university students, were employed to maintain plant and machinery at the Hamilton Palace Colliery near Bothwell; though they were subsequently removed by the management following an angry demonstration by 3,000 strikers.<sup>324</sup>

The unions were generally dismissive of claims that volunteers could run the affected industries for any length of time, particularly with regard to work in coal mines. Will Thorn, addressing members of the National Union of General Workers at Leeds, pointed out that the MCU could not simply march into the pits: 'If they did, they would damn well fall to the bottom. They would have the winders to ask before they could go down, and an inexperienced winder would soon settle their fate'.<sup>325</sup> Although this contained a large element of truth, the debacle of Black Friday meant that the miners were left to fight alone; and in such highly unfavourable economic circumstances that volunteer labour did not need to enter the pits in any numbers. More significant was the question of solidarity action from the transport unions. This was the one area where the government and their supporters on the right could claim at least some experience; and could mobilise relatively large numbers of volunteers. Arguably, it was this ability which unnerved some of the union leaders. The government certainly believed that 'the readiness of the arrangements had been an important factor in avoiding an extension of the coal strike to the railways, transport and other industries'.<sup>326</sup>

Writing in the *New Voice* under the pseudonym, 'John Citizen MP', J. R. Pretyman Newman, Unionist MP for Finchley, stated that 'for the first time the leaders of organised labour found themselves up against an organised and determined Middle Class,

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<sup>324</sup> *The Times*, 7 April 1921; *Scotsman*, 7 April 1921.

<sup>325</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 12.

<sup>326</sup> Desmarais, 'The British government's strikebreaking organisation and Black Friday' ..., p. 126.

the one force that Lenin and all his tribe has confessed is capable of defeating them'.<sup>327</sup>

The stance of the MCU was hailed as a major factor precipitating the union climb-down:

...on that Friday afternoon...the Cramps, the Williams and the Bramleys – conscious that in the face of a body of men and women who had no intention of allowing themselves to be bullied and starved into submission, 40 per cent of the railwaymen and 60 per cent of the transport workers would refuse to come out – threw up the sponge and John Citizen had won his victory.<sup>328</sup>

Lord Askwith, the MCU president, who, as Chief Industrial Commissioner from 1911-19, had gained the reputation of 'Number 1 Peacemaker in Industry',<sup>329</sup> reiterated the point, noting that the 'real break off of the Triple Alliance arose from the reluctance of the rank and file to join in a dispute which was not their own, and go out upon issues which they did not understand'.<sup>330</sup> By its firm resolve, therefore, and by focusing its fire on the alleged 'misleaders of labour' rather than the rank and file, the MCU claimed to have stimulated the consciences of the majority of moderate workers to the extent that the militants lost their nerve and abandoned their aggressive strategy.

Although the MCU naturally laid claim to a share of the credit, its efforts were again dwarfed by the official emergency machinery, which was able to recruit some 80,000 men at short notice into the newly formed 'Defence Force', in addition to its

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<sup>327</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 4.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>329</sup> G. K. Menzies, 'Death of Lord Askwith', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, Vol. 90, No. 4615 (12 June 1942), p. 459.

<sup>330</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 10.

regular army and navy reserves.<sup>331</sup> It is difficult to accurately gauge the effectiveness of a movement which was not actually called upon to prove its mettle to any significant degree. Such difficulties have rarely inhibited those keen to advance their cause, however, and MCU accounts of the crisis of 1921 are no exception. Among the more sober analyses was that of Lord Askwith which shows the MCU acted as one part of a much larger official movement:

The natural course was to follow the lines laid down by the Government as requisite. These were directed towards the maintenance of essential supplies, the avoidance of misery and hardship, the protection of persons and property and the continuance of industry and employment in the highest measure possible under the circumstances. In all these directions the Middle Classes Union, aided by active staff work at Headquarters and in many branches, exercised influence and did work. They showed how organisation pays.<sup>332</sup>

A more telling criticism from the left and labour circles was that the MCU and kindred organisations were simply taking sides with the employers and government against the working class. A month after the crisis the MCU general secretary, Captain Stanley Abbot, took issue with the view that ‘the action of the MCU on the ground...indicated a partisan attitude towards the dispute itself’. He pointed out that ‘the public’ had every right to defend itself from any quarter which subjected it to a ‘stranglehold’ which threatened its ‘very means of subsistence’. He claimed that ‘so long

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<sup>331</sup> *The Times*, 14 April 1921; Jeffery and Hennessy, p. 64.

<sup>332</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 10.



as the dispute was confined to issues between the coal owners and the coal miners, it was not the business of the Middle Classes Union as such'. However, once 'the country became faced with the threat of a sympathetic strike by the...Triple Alliance, it was imperative to take necessary steps for self-preservation'.<sup>333</sup> This rather disingenuous argument – particularly when the MCU *was* intervening directly in the coal dispute, as in Lanarkshire – was to become the stock response of the MCU to the accusation of partisanship; and it regularly denied any intention of acting in a strike-breaking capacity. The fact that a major shibboleth of the MCU – 'economy' – was often the motor force propelling the government and employers into conflict with the unions at this time seemed to escape them; or rather, such issues were studiously presented as being separate matters altogether.

A sharp fall in the number of strikes after 1921 – resulting from the same economic downturn that had so debilitated the miners' chances of success after Black Friday – led to a commensurate decline in the importance of the government's official strike-breaking machinery.<sup>334</sup> Another factor contributing to this, arising partly from the widespread clamour for economy alluded to above was the realisation that such responsibilities – in part – could be farmed out to non-governmental bodies. Townshend points out that Sir Eric Geddes, former organiser of the STO, though in September 1921 acting as the 'government's financial axe-man', proposed the scrapping of his earlier creation, explaining that while it was perfectly natural that the public had formerly looked to the government to protect 'the community from the irresponsible attacks of extremists...[t]his state of things has now passed. Private initiative has once more

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<sup>333</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 11.

<sup>334</sup> R. H. Desmarais, 'Strikebreaking and the Labour Government of 1924', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (October 1973), p. 165.

reasserted itself”.<sup>335</sup> While the relatively peaceful industrial landscape of 1922-3 saw an easing of tension in government circles, the MCU remained keenly alert, keeping its powder dry for the confidently predicted showdown with the unions. January 1922 saw the organisation re-brand itself as the NCU. Although ostensibly intended as a means to allow a wider appeal, beyond the sectional constraints implied in the former name, the ‘new’ body retained its pro-business bias, reasserting its support for ‘individual enterprise and private interests in industry’ and its opposition to ‘Industrial (i.e. “Direct”) Action for Political purposes’.<sup>336</sup>

The news in late 1922 that Italian Fascists had successfully put down an insurgent workers’ movement, partly through using aggressive strike-breaking tactics, was a source of great inspiration to the British right. The development spawned new organisations like the British Fascisti, who shared some personnel with the NCU, and adopted near-identical slogans and tactics on industrial issues. The improved economic situation towards the end of 1923 augured opportunities for these organisations to engage in renewed strike-breaking activity as the unions sought to stem the fall in wages which had occurred over the previous year.<sup>337</sup> The advent of the first Labour government in early 1924 appeared to deepen this prospect and was seen initially by the right as a harbinger of doom, destined to unleash a wave of politically motivated strikes. Neither for the first time nor the last, however, the anti-socialist right misread the psychology of the British labour movement entirely. Ironically, when the penny eventually dropped, in the sphere of industrial politics at least, organisations like the NCU and the nascent British Fascists

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<sup>335</sup> C. Townshend, *Public Order and Public Security in Modern Britain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1993), p. 91.

<sup>336</sup> *New Voice*, January 1922, p. 6.

<sup>337</sup> Jeffrey and Hennessy, p. 79.

were forced by the logic of their professed ‘non-political’ stance to offer their services to the new ‘Socialist’ government during the few examples of industrial action which occurred during its tenure.<sup>338</sup>

As the new government was about to take office in January 1924, the NCU was involved in efforts to break an unofficial strike by 69,000 train drivers and firemen. It later claimed that 3,000 volunteers had enrolled at its London headquarters alone, and that it had been able to organise a ‘special motor lorry service’ to ferry commuters to and from work. On the initiative of the East Fulham branch, NCU members carried special passes signed by the local secretary which secured them a place on such transport. Additionally, the organisation provided the authorities with ‘a large number of special constables’, and ran an overnight courier service transporting ‘certain bags and consignments of mails’ in its lorries. The dispute ended quickly, however, and the NCU admitted that many of its volunteers were not needed.<sup>339</sup>

Subsequently, with Labour in office and trade union leaders like Jimmy Thomas in the Cabinet, there was an inevitable tendency to seek accommodation in industrial matters, which had the potential to destroy the NCU’s pretensions as defender of ‘the public’. In a speech prepared for the Edinburgh branch of the NCU, Professor Charles Sarolea correctly surmised that ‘the Government will be concerned to settle strikes rather than to encourage them’.<sup>340</sup> Despite this the *New Voice* pointed out that as under previous governments ‘the NCU is determined to help’ and was continuing to enrol volunteers, claiming its offices were receiving new applications in every post (Figure 2.3). It stressed

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<sup>338</sup> *The Times*, 28 March 1924.

<sup>339</sup> *New Voice*, May 1924, p. 8.

<sup>340</sup> *New Voice*, April 1924, p. 9.

that 'When the next strike occurs, and the Socialist agitators will see that one is engineered soon, the NCU will be...ready'.<sup>341</sup>



**The National Citizens' Union and Strikes**  
(Headquarters Staff dealing with offers of personal service.) See also page 8.

Figure 2.3. *New Voice*, May 1924, p. 1.

As matters turned out, following the rail dispute the strike-breaking capabilities of the right were not called upon by the new government, and there were even some tentative steps taken to remove what Josiah Wedgwood described as the 'fascisti atmosphere' of the official emergency organisation.<sup>342</sup> As historians have pointed out, however, Labour ministers largely left the strike-breaking machinery in the care of the

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<sup>341</sup> *New Voice*, May 1924, p. 8.

<sup>342</sup> Desmarais, 'Strikebreaking and the Labour Government of 1924', pp. 170-1; Jeffrey and Hennessy, pp. 81-3. Wedgwood was Chief Civil Commissioner during Labour's brief spell in government.

civil servants who had administered it since 1919, and respected pleas from their Conservative predecessors to keep its plans secret.<sup>343</sup> The complexities of the MCU's relationship with the government in this sphere were eased considerably by the collapse of the Labour administration and its replacement by a Conservative government following the general election of October 1924.

Opposition to strikes was not an end in itself for the MCU/NCU. Industrial unrest was regarded as merely an outward expression of the socialist cancer which was allegedly eating away at the British labour movement from the inside. Thus, while a major focus of MCU activity during the strikes of 1919-21 was the maintenance of essential services, the organisation continued to emphasise its wider anti-socialist message, and linked the electoral challenge from the Labour Party with the disruption engendered by industrial action. During the Manchester Rusholme by-election campaign, which coincided with the railwaymen's strike of 1919, the MCU pressed candidates on their attitude to such disputes, insisting that they 'advocate the strongest opposition to the extreme Labour policy of direct action'.<sup>344</sup> During the abortive transport strike of spring 1921 the MCU colluded with government officials, possibly via Admiral Hall, to distribute government anti-strike propaganda disguised as impartial opinion.<sup>345</sup> During the November 1922 general election campaign the NCU compiled a questionnaire for candidates asking if they opposed direct action by industrial organisations 'to effect political purposes' and, if so, whether they would support legislation dealing with secret

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<sup>343</sup> Desmarais, pp. 169, 173-5; Jeffrey and Hennessy, pp. 76-86.

<sup>344</sup> *Scotsman*, 30 September 1919.

<sup>345</sup> NA CAB 27/75, Meeting of the Supply and Transport Committee, 23 July 1921. Quoted in I. McLean, 'Popular Protest and Public Order: Red Clydeside, 1915-1919', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Popular Protest and Public Order: Six Studies in British History 1790-1920*, Allen and Unwin, London (1974), p. 238.

ballots, the trade union political funds and trade union immunities.<sup>346</sup> Questions on such matters were regularly directed at Ministers by the MCU's parliamentary supporters. In 1920 J. R. Pretyman Newman, the Chairman of the MCU Parliamentary Committee, called for the revision or repeal of the 1906 Trades Disputes Act, which he described as an 'Anarchists' Charter'.<sup>347</sup> In the wake of the 1921 dispute other supporters of the Parliamentary Committee called for the repeal the 1906 Act and for the appointment of a Royal Commission to ascertain the necessity of legislation 'so as to prevent revolutionary agitation under the guise of legitimate labour activities'.<sup>348</sup>

During 1925 the NCU was involved in moves to create a national strikebreaking force capable of standing up to the looming threat of a general strike. In October 1925 the *New Voice* reported that the NCU had decided in early September to co-operate with the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) in order to 'prevent overlapping and the risk of consequent lack of efficiency'.<sup>349</sup> The NCU General Secretary, Colonel H. D. Lawrence, was appointed as liaison officer and was in close touch with OMS officials. By October the plan for co-operation was circulated to NCU branches. Meantime, many members of the NCU were already sitting on the local committees of a number of newly formed OMS branches. The arrangements subsequently adopted were very similar to the agreement between the BEU and the OMS. Their rationale was certainly identical. In January 1926 Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, the OMS President, described the NCU as 'an association which has...won its spurs in the strenuous fight it has made against the subversive forces which, instigated by Moscow, threaten our Empire and our liberty'. He

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<sup>346</sup> *New Voice*, November 1922, p. 9.

<sup>347</sup> *New Voice*, April 1920, p. 6.

<sup>348</sup> *New Voice*, May 1921, p. 5.

<sup>349</sup> *New Voice*, October 1925, p. 14.

went on to point out that as the OMS had been set up to fulfil one of the aims of the NCU – that of maintaining services in an emergency – it was ‘obvious...that there should be the closest unity between the two’. Unity was necessary to avoid the wasteful overlapping characteristic of earlier anti-subversive movements. Hardinge was confident that ‘arrangements have been made between the NCU and OMS of such a character as to remove all fear that friction, jealousy or overlapping...can arise’. Under the agreement, therefore, the existing propaganda role of NCU continued, while the OMS occupied itself solely with compiling lists of volunteers.<sup>350</sup> These arrangements were laid before the public in December 1925 by Lord Hardinge who pointed out that the OMS had no intention of engaging in a propaganda campaign aimed at avoiding strikes:

It is going beyond our province. Excellent work in that way is being done by other bodies, and, in particular, by the British Empire Union and National Citizens’ Union, with whom we have working agreements. We are quite content to leave the ‘preventive’ work in their hands.<sup>351</sup>

After the strike, Hardinge recognised the importance of the NCU and BEU within the OMS, thanking them in the pages of the press.<sup>352</sup>

Throughout the nine day duration of the General Strike the NCU activity centred on organising volunteer labour, and occurred under the aegis of the OMS and the official Supply and Transport machinery. Some idea of the specific contribution to this wider movement made by the NCU can, however, be gleaned from the numerous post-strike

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<sup>350</sup> *New Voice*, January 1926, p.2.

<sup>351</sup> *The Times*, 1 December 1925.

<sup>352</sup> *The Times*, 24 May 1926. *Scotsman*, 21 May 1926.

reports in the *New Voice* and from the pages of the *NCU Bulletin*, a special daily news-sheet, only three issues of which were circulated before the strike ended abruptly on 12 May. The purpose of the *Bulletin* was ‘to give information and only authenticated news: to hearten the public, and to help the essential services to proceed’. The fact that the first issue did not appear until day five of the strike meant that some of the anxiety characteristic of pre-strike propaganda had given way to a more optimistic outlook. Despite this there was no complacency in the contributions to the *Bulletin* made by leading NCU members. An appeal from Prebendary Gough exhorted NCU supporters to enrol as volunteers, and to provide transportation and accommodation for those prepared to defy the strike call. He tried to rekindle the patriotic spirit of the Great War, pointing out that ‘every *good worker* is a public servant, and deserves to be backed up and helped as we backed and helped the men who saved us from the German attacks’.<sup>353</sup> Lord Askwith urged the workers’ leaders to call off all sympathetic action in support of the miners, pointing out that such strikes would ‘effect nothing but loss, hardship, misery and ill-feeling’. He too impressed upon NCU members the urgent necessity of action in support of the ‘Constitution’:

The National Citizens’ Union stand for orderly and good government. Every member – man or woman – should be up and doing. It is no time for talk, but, in small ways or in big, it is a duty to aid or be ready to aid the efforts of the Government to maintain and protect government, law, and order, and to prevent the slow throttling of the people.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> *NCU Bulletin*, No. 1, 7 May 1926, p. 1.

<sup>354</sup> *NCU Bulletin*, No. 3, 11 May 1926, p. 1.



Even more dramatic were the words of Lieutenant-Colonel K. P. Vaughan-Morgan, Conservative MP for East Fulham, who echoed Gough in describing the crisis as an epic struggle against tyranny comparable to the war. He castigated the TUC General Council as ‘a self-chosen junta, responsible to nobody, elected by nobody, endeavouring to get their way by brute force’, representing a similar threat to that formerly posed by the Prussian General Staff.<sup>355</sup>

Under the heading ‘Strike Volunteers Save the Country’ a detailed breakdown of the role of NCU branches during the crisis filled five pages of June’s *New Voice*.<sup>356</sup> Additionally, in May 1927 summaries of annual reports compiled by NCU branches were published in the organisation’s recently renamed journal, the *National Citizen*. They reiterated the ‘magnificent work’ carried out by branches during the crisis. Among the many mentioned were Shrewsbury, where a ‘car transport service numbering some 150 cars’ was operated with the co-operation of local taxi drivers; Worthing, where a Volunteer Service Office was opened by the branch ‘at the request of the Town Council’; Liverpool, where ‘thousands of volunteers were enrolled as Special Police, shipping and dock workers, railway and transport workers, etc.’; and Marylebone, where ‘the branch did splendid work for the Government, the railways, and other bodies’ and ‘produced a typewritten bulletin of its own’.<sup>357</sup> R. Burnett, the Chairman of the Edinburgh branch of the NCU, wrote to the *Scotsman* ‘to express the very warm thanks of the Union to its numerous members who volunteered for all kinds of service during the recent industrial

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<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>356</sup> *New Voice*, June 1926, pp. 3-7.

<sup>357</sup> *National Citizen*, May 1927, pp. 13-16.

crisis'. He went on to state that 'I have reason to know that these services were highly appreciated by the authorities concerned, and were most helpful to the community'.<sup>358</sup>

The view from the left, of course, was rather less complimentary. In the run up to the General Strike, Joseph F. Duncan, the leader of the Scottish Farm Servant's Union, during the course of his presidential address to the Scottish TUC in April 1926, had described 'the various emergency organisations, such as the OMS the National Citizens' Union and the British Fascisti' as nothing but 'Falstaffian armies', and suggested that 'Attempts to carry on such services by improvised staffs of blacklegs would merely lead to greater bitterness'.<sup>359</sup> In one respect Duncan was spot on: the volunteers' actions did indeed generate deep and enduring bitterness in many working-class communities.<sup>360</sup>

The experience of the General Strike dominated subsequent discussions among NCU members regarding the best means of curtailing industrial action. There was some divergence over which strategy should be prioritised: greater activism and direct physical confrontation with the unions or the legislative approach. On the whole the NCU opted for caution, favouring a renewed campaign for laws against labour militancy. This was a reflection of the strength of orthodox Conservative opinion within the organisation, which naturally favoured a legislative solution, and in part due to recognition that the General Strike had passed off remarkably peacefully, negating the necessity of any drastic 'Mussolini-style' solution to Britain's industrial malaise.

This debate surfaced in November 1926 at a meeting of its Grand Council. In previous months a NCU Special Committee had drawn up a series of draft Bills dealing

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<sup>358</sup> *Scotsman*, 22 May 1926.

<sup>359</sup> *Scotsman*, 22 April 1926.

<sup>360</sup> See, for example, the reminiscences of Rose Kerrigan in R. H. Saltzman, 'Folklore as Politics in Great Britain: Working-Class Critiques of Upper-Class Strike Breakers in the 1926 General Strike', *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (July 1994), p. 106.

with various aspects of industrial relations. By the time the Grand Council met six drafts existed. Colonel A. H. Lane, who had subscribed fifty pounds to secure the services of a professional parliamentary draftsman, successfully suggested consolidating the six drafts into three.<sup>361</sup> It was agreed to promote the Bills in the next session of Parliament.<sup>362</sup>

In addition to the legislative campaign Major Lawther of the Southend branch proposed a NCU 'Volunteer Force to be trained for emergency work'. He argued that the General Strike had proved that while people had been willing to serve their country many were unable to do so because they lacked the necessary training. He was supported by Prebendary Gough who claimed that 'The country...had suffered intolerably for many years because it had been guided in high policy and in other policy by timidity'. He criticised the Conservative government for 'lagg[ing] behind the determination of the people'.<sup>363</sup>

There was considerable opposition to Lawther and Gough's proposals, however. A number of delegates stressed the impracticability of the scheme, including Colonel Southam of Woking, who 'urged that the Union was not strong enough to attempt the formation of a large national force'. He and others favoured the parliamentary approach. Mr McAdams of Bristol stressed that 'the only way to deal with industrial unrest was to pass legislation making strikes illegal'; while Captain Boord, representing Worcester, argued that 'the NCU Bills already agreed should be enough to render the force unnecessary'. The Grand Council voted to postpone any decision on Lawther's resolution.

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<sup>361</sup> *National Citizen*, January 1927, p. 5.

<sup>362</sup> The three NCU Bills are reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 9-12.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

With these arguments effectively shelved for the time being, the NCU threw itself into the campaign to reform trade union law. The NCU tried to stimulate debate on its Bills through public meetings and by inserting an advert in *The Times* offering reprints of the Bills and inviting comment.<sup>364</sup> The views of a range of Conservative MPs and peers regarding the NCU's proposals were subsequently published in the *National Citizen*. While most expressed strong sympathy with the principles behind the proposed legislation, many pointed out that the government had already promised to update the laws dealing with industrial disputes and that it might be wiser to ascertain their intentions before the introduction of the NCU proposals.<sup>365</sup>

However indirectly, the views of the NCU do appear to have influenced the formulation of the government's Bill.<sup>366</sup> Baldwin, although personally disinclined to introduce stringent restrictions on the unions, was under irresistible pressure from the Conservative Party grass-roots and right-wing Cabinet Ministers. This had been evident at the party conference at Scarborough in October 1926, where supporters of the NCU were among those expressing intense resentment against trade union militancy. This prompted deep concern among the party leadership – expressed by Sir George Younger in a letter to J. C. C. Davidson – that a new 'Die-hard group may...appear on the scene and split our Party'.<sup>367</sup> It is noteworthy that when the government's own proposals were unveiled on 4 April 1927 they bore a close resemblance to those championed by the NCU. Consequently the organisation warmly welcomed the government's Trade Disputes

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<sup>364</sup> *The Times*, 22 January 1927.

<sup>365</sup> *National Citizen*, February 1927, p. 7.

<sup>366</sup> M. C. Shefftz, 'The Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act of 1927: The Aftermath of the General Strike', *Review of Politics*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July 1967), p. 397.

<sup>367</sup> K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London (1969), pp. 444-50.

and Trade Unions Bill; and some of those previously critical of Baldwin's alleged timidity hailed it as a long-awaited 'sign of strength'.<sup>368</sup> The NCU quietly dropped its own Bills in favour of wholehearted support for the government, a position formalised at the annual meeting of the Grand Council on 27 April 1927.<sup>369</sup>

The foregoing chapter shows that the MCU/NCU played a significant role in articulating the anxieties and galvanising the political energies of middle-class Britons in the 1920s. Far from being merely an element of the 'lunatic fringe' of Conservative politics the organisation attracted a mass membership in the early years of the decade, and was able to make its influence felt at the local and national levels both in the political and industrial spheres. In 1919-22 it tapped into a rich vein of middle-class anger and confusion at the economic and political changes brought about by the war and the rise of Labour. This shaped the outlook of the anti-socialist right and, temporarily, shook its traditional and instinctive affinity with the Conservative Party. The activism of the MCU/NCU played a role in encouraging disaffection with the Coalition among backbench Conservative MPs and among party activists. Although the organisation was willing to lend support to independent and unconventional political formations like the Anti-Waste League, it remained fundamentally Conservative in outlook. MCU efforts to rouse the middle class out of their apathy were predominantly exerted 'respectfully' through parliamentary and other legal means; and it constantly solicited the patronage of respectable establishment figures. The organisation consistently perceived the main threat to middle-class interests as coming from socialism and the organised labour movement.

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<sup>368</sup> *National Citizen*, May 1927, p. 11.

<sup>369</sup> *National Citizen*, June 1927, p. 11.

After 1922 the Conservative Party embraced much of the rhetoric of the MCU and the anti-socialist/anti-waste milieu generally. It imposed deflationary economic policies which defused middle-class anger; and employed populist and patriotic notions of the 'public' and 'community' as a means of marginalising the labour movement and incorporating former Liberal voters.<sup>370</sup> The fact that the Conservative Party successfully championed middle-class interests from 1922 inevitably took the wind out of the sails of the anti-socialist right; suffice to say the MCU never attained the multi-million-strong membership it was boldly predicting in 1920-1. Although the NCU continued to campaign over specific middle-class grievances after 1922, they were not nearly as explosive or controversial with the Conservatives in office with a clear parliamentary majority. Despite this the organisation remained a significant force on the anti-socialist right, due to its anti-communist propaganda and its role as a strike-breaking body. The defeat of the General Strike in May 1926, however, despite being regarded by the organisation as its 'finest hour', in fact heralded a prolonged period of decline for the NCU. It tried to maintain its influence by associating with Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson's triumphalist Clear Out the Reds movement in 1926-7. In the later 1920s it refocused its attention on issues of taxation and expenditure.<sup>371</sup> The demise of the organisation appears to have been postponed partly due to the financial largesse of wealthy supporters like Colonel Lane, whose fervent opposition to the menace of alien immigration took the organisation in an anti-Semitic direction in the 1930s, arguably exacerbating its marginalisation.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> R. McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1994), pp.259-93.

<sup>371</sup> *National Citizen*, July 1927, p. 3, December 1927, p. 13; *Scotsman*, 4 May 1928.

<sup>372</sup> *National Citizen*, January 1927, p. 5, May 1927, p. 5.

### Chapter 3.

#### **Tarring Labour with the Extremist Brush: The Anti-Socialist Right and Electoral Politics.**

In an anti-socialist handbook published in 1924 the right-wing conspiracy theorist, Nesta Webster, responded to the argument that Labour Party politicians were ‘clever and honest men’, by insisting that their continued adherence to socialist precepts in the face of their obvious falsehood, suggested, rather, that they ‘may be clever or they may be honest; they cannot be both’.<sup>373</sup> This assessment characterised the attitude of many right-wing critics of the Labour Party in the 1920s. Labour politicians were thus portrayed in two seemingly disparate ways. They were presented as idealists and dreamers, incapable of recognising the folly of their beliefs, and unfit to govern due to the incompetence which flowed from their flawed understanding of the world. Alternatively, they were sinister agents of a worldwide conspiracy to subvert and destroy Christian civilisation, cleverly duping the masses with their ‘moderation’ and promises of social reform: the masks with which they concealed their true objective of violent revolution and the debasement of humanity. The propaganda of the British Empire Union and the National Citizens’ Union employed both arguments to attack the Labour Party, rarely deeming it necessary to justify the apparent contradiction between them. This view of the threat posed by the Labour Party, despite its contradictions, contributed to the development of an anti-socialist consensus in the 1920s which was particularly in evidence during elections both at the local and national levels. Fear of ‘socialism’ –

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<sup>373</sup> N. Webster, ‘What is Socialism?’, in *A Handbook for Anti-Socialists*, Boswell, London (n.d. [1924]), p. 14.

whether presented as experimental folly or sinister plot – was exploited to encourage anti-socialist alliances and pacts explicitly intended to keep Labour out of office. This chapter discusses the role of the BEU and the NCU in these developments.

During the Great War the BEU attacked those sections of the Labour Party which were opposed to the conflict. Ramsay MacDonald was attacked for his pacifist views, which were regarded as unpatriotic. In 1917 the BEU boasted that it had ‘actively and successfully [o]pposed the Pacifists in London and South Wales.... Mr. Ramsay MacDonald’s meeting was broken up, and Mr. Ramsay MacDonald himself took to flight’.<sup>374</sup> The BEU co-operated with ultra-nationalist labour bodies like the British Workers’ League to disrupt anti-war meetings organised by the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the non-party Union for Democratic Change (UDC). BEU leaders conflated the pacifism of Labour opponents of the war with revolutionary socialism. In June 1917 the BEU President, Lord Leith of Fyvie, wrote that ‘there is a mixed body of Pacifists, Socialists, Internationalists, Revolutionists and others, bound together under the ILP and the UDC’. By March 1918, another senior member of the BEU, F. E. Culling Carr, was claiming that ‘individuals such as MacDonald and Snowden might “pose as Pacifists and Conscientious Objectors, but their main objective is *Revolution*”’.<sup>375</sup> After the war the BEU continued to assert that the left in the Labour Party had ‘gone Russian’. The BEU’s national organiser, Captain Parsons, warned that a future Labour election victory would be calamitous for Britain because ‘the unspeakable hell created by

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<sup>374</sup> BEU, *New Year, 1917*, p. 1.

<sup>375</sup> Panayi, p. 122.



Bolshevik principles in Russia...might easily be created here'.<sup>376</sup> In March 1920 the BEU Vice-Chairman, Sir Ernest Wild, Unionist MP for Upton, wrote:

I turn to *the* enemy. It calls itself the 'Labour Party' – a most misleading appellation. Mr. Churchill, who is ever bold, called it, at Dundee the other day, the 'Socialist' Party. I call it the 'Communist' Party, or, if they prefer it, the 'Bolshevist' Party...the present 'Labour' Members are but tails wagged by the Dog of Communism.<sup>377</sup>

During a 1921 debate with Henry Hyndman of the Social-Democratic Federation, the Duke of Northumberland, President of the City of London BEU branch, set out to prove that 'the so-called "moderate" leaders of Labour are working, consciously or unconsciously, for the same world revolution as the Extremists, and that there is no single aim of the Red International of Moscow which is not also an aim of the Labour Party'.<sup>378</sup>

Northumberland later wrote describing the poison of subversion 'working through all the European body politic' in a variety of 'subtle forms', one of which was the professed moderate reformism characteristic of the British Labour Party. The party was part of a great international subversive movement 'though their adherents are not all aware of it, and the strings are pulled by the Secret Societies which during the past century have been behind every revolution in Europe'.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Panayi, p. 123.

<sup>377</sup> E. E. Wild, 'The Coalition', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, Vol. 87, No. 517 (March 1920), p. 404.

<sup>378</sup> Duke of Northumberland, 'Bolshevism and the Labour Party', *National Review*, Vol. 77, (June 1921), p. 617.

<sup>379</sup> Foreword to C. Tormay, *An Outlaw's Diary*, Vol. 1, Philip Allen, London (1923), pp. ix-xii.

In October 1922 the *Empire Record* published a sarcastic aside on Labour's 'magnificent gesture' of barring the CPGB from affiliating to it. The author stated:

I am assured that the Labour Party have nothing whatever to do with the rude, red-handed ghouls of Moscow – except, of course, in such little matters as sending them fraternal greetings...; or demanding immediate recognition of the Soviet Government; or helping Soviet wars by holding up munition ships; or in forming councils of action on the Soviet model.<sup>380</sup>

The BEU annual report for that year warned that 'anti-socialist forces had to prepare themselves for a possible [socialist] victory at the next election and organise to fight and destroy Labour's attempts to 'Bolshevise' Britain.'<sup>381</sup> In July and August 1923 the *Empire Record* exposed continuing links between the Labour and Communist parties despite a renewed official ban on affiliation.<sup>382</sup>

Strangely – given the general outlook of the MCU/NCU and in light of some of his own comments on other occasions – in 1920 Lord Askwith, criticised Sir Winston Churchill's statement that Labour was 'unfit to govern', and stated that critics of Labour would only be driving more and more people into the Labour Party by attacking them as Bolsheviks, which they were not'.<sup>383</sup> In contrast, the *New Voice* later condoned Churchill's remarks,<sup>384</sup> and, generally, speeches and articles by MCU/NCU members

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<sup>380</sup> *Empire Record*, October 1922, p. 171.

<sup>381</sup> BEU, *Annual Report* (1922), pp. 4-6.

<sup>382</sup> *Empire Record*, July 1923, p. 127, August 1923, pp. 136-7.

<sup>383</sup> *The Times*, 20 Feb 1920.

<sup>384</sup> *New Voice*, October 1921, p. 3

throughout the 1920s conformed to the view that the Labour's moderation was mere window-dressing, hiding extreme socialist and communist viewpoints.<sup>385</sup>

The anti-socialist right repeatedly questioned the patriotism of the Labour Party. In January 1923 the BEU attacked Labour's foreign policy as 'Pro-Germanism Rampant'. The party was accused of 'intense hostility to England...a constant devotion to the enemies of the British Empire, and a continual outpouring of virulent criticism on all allied or friendly countries'. Labour's commitment to self-determination was ridiculed: 'Egypt, India, Ireland are all encouraged to self-determine themselves away from the Empire...even if they at the same time determine themselves into complete anarchy'.<sup>386</sup> Two months later the *Empire Record* carried the following:

The Socialists champion Germans, Indian seditionists, De Valera's warmongers, foreign immigrants, and any and every enemy of the British Empire. Their political pretence that they represent the masses of the people of this country who work for a living is clearly a transparent lie. Their friends are the enemies of Britain.<sup>387</sup>

In December 1923, in an otherwise relatively measured assessment of the potential pitfalls of a future Labour government, the Secretary of the BEU, Reginald Wilson, suggested that one outcome might be the break up of the British Empire:

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<sup>385</sup> *New Voice*, May 1920, p. 3, March 1925, p. 9.

<sup>386</sup> *Empire Record*, January 1923, pp. 20-21.

<sup>387</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1923, p. 86.

Some members of the Labour Party are frankly in favour of the destruction of the Empire; and there are undoubtedly certain sinister alien influences at work behind the party which are deliberately directed to this end. More danger is, perhaps, to be feared from the general theoretical policy of the party which...would give democratic self-government to all parts of the Empire and force a legal equality between widely differing races.<sup>388</sup>

The fate of the Empire under Labour was the subject of an article in the *Empire Record* by Sir Henry Page Croft. He concluded by saying ‘We can have Socialism which means ruin, or we can have an Empire. We cannot have both, so the choice is with the people, and they must speak in no uncertain voice’.<sup>389</sup> Much was made of the Labour Party’s affiliation to the Socialist International. In December 1923 the BEU described the Labour Party as ‘headed by Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, with that sinister international organisation, the Sozialistische Arbeiter Internationale in the background, pulling the wires in the interests of Berlin and Moscow’.<sup>390</sup>

Another means of casting doubt on Labour’s patriotism was over an issue which had long been close to the hearts of anti-socialist campaigners: alien immigration. The BEU and NCU regularly encouraged the view that Labour would place the interests of aliens above those of ‘true-born Britons’. Following the accession of Britain’s first Labour government in early 1924, although concerns that all anti-alien legislation would be repealed proved unfounded, certain measures taken in this sphere were seized upon as clear evidence of Labour’s anti-British, pro-alien leanings. This was the case with the

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<sup>388</sup> R. Wilson, ‘The Labour Party and the Future’, *English Review*, Vol. 37 (December 1923), pp. 781-2.

<sup>389</sup> *Empire Record*, July 1924, pp. 120-1.

<sup>390</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1923, p. 4.

decision by the Minister of Labour, Tom Shaw, to extend the right to unemployment benefits to resident foreign workers. In a BEU cartoon alluding to the question of 'doles for aliens' Shaw is portrayed picking the pocket of a terrified British tax payer and handing over a bag of money labelled 'Baksheesh' to a leering Jew, while a range of other stereotyped foreigners line up for their share of the pickings (Figure 3.1).

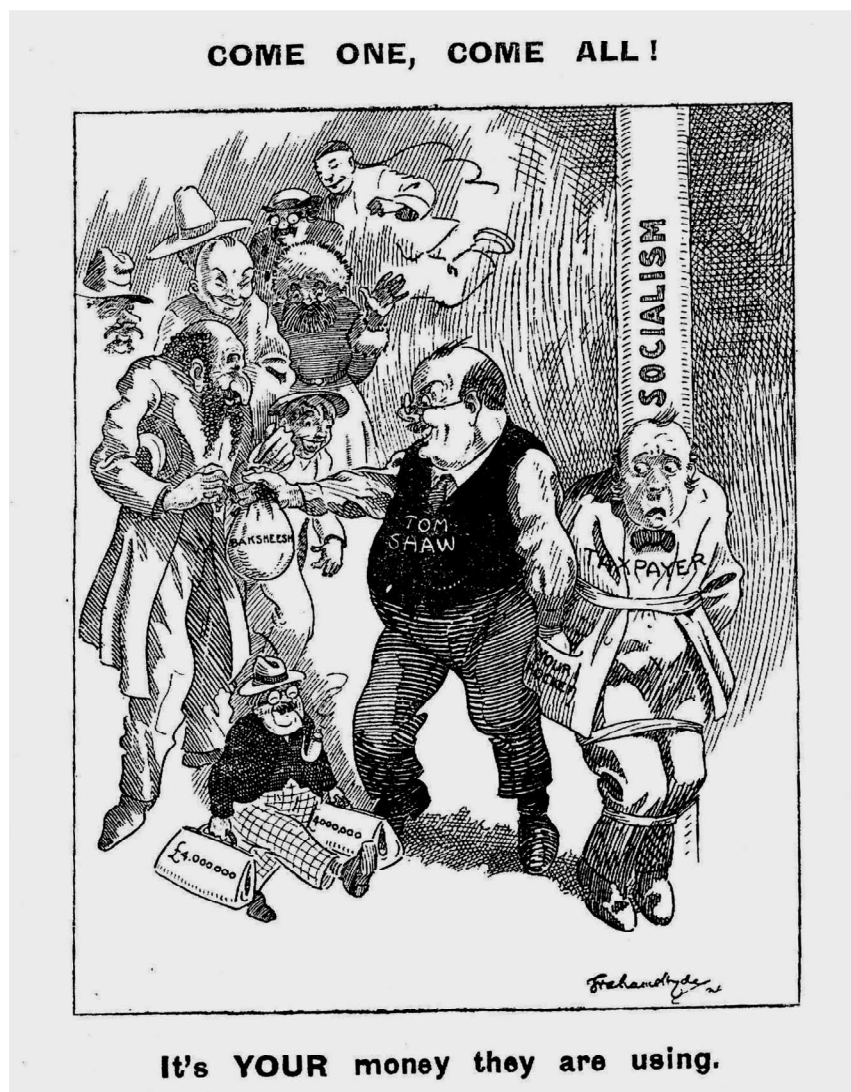


Figure 3.1. *Empire Record*, April 1924, p. i.

During the general election of October 1924 the ‘Alien Menace’ emerged as a powerful component in the arsenal of scaremongering propaganda employed by the anti-socialist right. Defries cites an anti-alien speech made by BEU supporter, Sir Ronald McNeill, Conservative MP for Canterbury, asserting that under a ‘Socialist’ government, ‘if two persons were competing for a house, and one of them was an Englishman and the other a Polish Jew or Russian Revolutionary, the preference would not be given to the Englishman’.<sup>391</sup> The Zinoviev Letter incident at the end of the campaign merely added fuel to an already inflamed discourse.

A great deal of anti-Labour propaganda dealt with the party’s alleged profligacy whenever it was allowed into office. Much of this concerned Labour’s record in the administration of local authorities. A 1922 NCU pamphlet claimed that wherever Labour managed to gain a controlling vote in a locality ‘disaster followed almost immediately’. In particular, Labour successes in London resulted in ‘an orgy of unheard-of extravagance’.<sup>392</sup> That election year the *Empire Record* carried two articles on ‘How Labour-Socialists Would Govern You’. The first, in October, dealt with taxation. Labour’s plans to reduce the tax burden on lower earners whilst increasing it for the rich were described as ‘The Great “Hold Up”’, while the policy of a capital levy on wealth was described as a ‘programme of pillage’ which would almost certainly result in a slump.<sup>393</sup> In November the theme was nationalisation. The ‘Labour-Socialists’ were attacked for waging ‘war on private enterprise’, while their policy of nationalisation would take Britain down the same road as Soviet Russia – ‘tyranny, bankruptcy, and the

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<sup>391</sup> H. Defries, *Conservative Party Attitudes to Jews, 1900-1950*, Frank Cass (London), p. 91.

<sup>392</sup> Eyre-Todd, *Mobocracy...*, p. 32-3.

<sup>393</sup> *Empire Record*, October 1922, pp. 165-6.

starvation of millions'.<sup>394</sup> In 1923 Reginald Wilson attacked the Labour Party for being 'pledged to the lunacy of the capital levy. It is difficult to measure the financial and industrial disturbance that would result from this insane project of raising £3,000 millions in one fell swoop'.<sup>395</sup> The policy was also roundly attacked in a leader article by E. H. Blakeney in the *New Voice*.<sup>396</sup>

This general barrage of anti-Labour propaganda intensified considerably during parliamentary and municipal elections. Additionally, the anti-socialist right sought to curtail the chances of the Labour Party by encouraging and participating in the formation of anti-socialist alliances and pacts designed to limit the number of candidates fighting elections against Labour to one per seat, thus avoiding damaging splits in the anti-socialist vote.

As pointed out earlier, elections during the Coalition period highlighted the level of middle-class and right-wing opposition to Lloyd George's government, but also exposed the dangers of standing candidates against the Coalition and thus dispersing the votes of the anti-Labour majority in many constituencies. This issue was central in debates surrounding the future of the Conservative Party at the time. Conservative supporters of the Coalition – including advocates of 'fusion' with Liberal supporters of Lloyd George – and the Conservative 'Die-hard' opponents of the government, 'were agreed that socialism was *the* enemy which had to be confronted and defeated'.<sup>397</sup> What divided them was the best way of achieving this goal.<sup>398</sup> Similar differences of approach existed between the BEU and the MCU/NCU and among individuals within these

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<sup>394</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1922, pp. 184-6.

<sup>395</sup> Wilson, 'The Labour Party...', p. 781.

<sup>396</sup> *New Voice*, September 1923, p. 3.

<sup>397</sup> Green, 'Conservative Anti-Socialism...', p. 126.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

organisations. The anti-Labour comments reproduced above from BEU Vice-Chairman, Ernest Wild, for example, are from an article extolling the virtues of Lloyd George and his Coalition, and calling for 'fusion'. Wild was also Vice Chairman of the New Members' Coalition Group, a cross-party group of MPs elected in 1918, which counted a number of BEU supporters in its ranks.<sup>399</sup> The Duke of Northumberland, by contrast, was an outspoken Die-hard critic of Lloyd George and all his works; while the BEU founder, Sir George Makgill, was a leading member of Horatio Bottomley's populist anti-Coalition pressure group, the People's League and was selected as a candidate to stand against the Coalition.<sup>400</sup>

Generally, on the few occasions that the issue was dealt with in the BEU press, the organisation expressed its support for the Coalition as a bulwark against revolution. Despite being highly critical of increased spending and bureaucracy by the Coalition, which were regarded as 'great measures of State socialism', the *Empire Record* insisted that:

If we destroy the Coalition Government nothing would stand between us and the 'Millen[n]ium', or Communist Mecca of riot and bloodshed. The Direct Action invoked by Parliamentary and moderate leaders of labour would then remove those leaders for more extreme men.... It is only in unity that we can derive strength; and, thank God, in adversity we have always been united.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> *The Times*, 20 January 1920, 8 March 1922.

<sup>400</sup> *The Scotsman*, 17 December 1920; *BEU Monthly Record*, December 1920, p.6.

<sup>401</sup> *Empire Record*, February 1921, p. 30.



In July 1921 the cover of the *Empire Record* contained a cartoon depicting ‘Lloyd George the Constitutionalist vs. Tom Mann the Communist Monster’, alongside the question ‘Under Which Leader?’<sup>402</sup>

As we have seen the MCU/NCU was far more critical of the Coalition. It was clearly of the opinion, however, that socialism was the main enemy, and the organisation was quite willing to offer its services to the government during industrial disputes, and collude with it in the distribution of anti-Bolshevist propaganda.<sup>403</sup> In 1920 the MCU informed potential supporters that it could ‘ensure by corporate action the return in every constituency of Constitutional Members of Parliament who would be pledged to serve the Middle Interests’. The same was true of ‘Municipal Bodies’, which it hoped to fill with ‘men and women pledged to oppose all extravagance and all expenditure not in the general interest’.<sup>404</sup>

The demise of the Coalition government negated many of these arguments and prompted a general election in November 1922. During campaigning the anti-socialist right enthusiastically rallied to the ‘Constitutionalist’ cause, which in most cases meant support for Conservative candidates. The BEU ‘circulated thousands of special election leaflets’ attacking the ‘Labour-Socialist’ Party (Figure 3.1).

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<sup>402</sup> *Empire Record*, July 1921, p. 105.

<sup>403</sup> NA CAB 27/84.

<sup>404</sup> Middle Classes Union, *What it is. Why it is Necessary. What it has Done and Can Do* (n. d. [1920]), Modern Records Centre, Warwick, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation archive, MSS.36/A24/1.

## B.E.U. ELECTION SLOGANS.

*We circulated thousands of Special Election Leaflets. Four specimens are reproduced below.*

### **THE LABOUR - SOCIALISTS ARE OUT TO DESTROY PRIVATE ENTERPRISE !**

**The Destruction of Private  
Enterprise means—**

More Government Departments.  
A New Army of Officials.  
Increase of Rates and Taxes.  
Return of War-time Conditions.

**DO YOU WANT THIS ?  
IF NOT—**

**VOTE AGAINST  
LABOUR-SOCIALISTS**

### **To THE WOMEN OF ENGLAND !**

**There was a War.**

You knew the danger.  
You played your part.  
You won the war.

**There is a War—Industrial War.**

Do you know the danger?  
Are you playing your part?  
Will you win that war?

**There is Danger of Revolution.**

It shouts at the street corners.  
It mutters in the factory.  
It threatens you all.

**It is YOUR Part to understand.**

You must recognise the danger.  
You must understand the cause.  
You must defend your homes.

**Revolution means Ruin, and for that Ruin  
the Woman always Pays. And Labour-  
Socialism means Revolution!**

To be a woman has been accounted a  
privilege; now it is a responsibility.

**HELP TO FIGHT  
THE LABOUR-SOCIALISTS**

### **NATIONALISATION.**

**WHAT IT REALLY MEANS—**

To the Worker	-	-	-	State Slavery
To the Consumer	-	-	-	High Prices
To the Taxpayer	-	-	-	Heavy Burdens
To the Employer	-	-	-	Ruin
To the Investor	-	-	-	Confiscation

**During the Great War, Mines and  
Railways were under State Control:  
What was the Result ?**

<b>On the Railways:</b>	<b>In the Coal Industry:</b>
Traffic Congestion	Higher Price
Higher Fares	Less Coal
Fewer Trains	More Strikes
Goods Held Up	Government Subsidies
Increased Working Cost	Increased Taxes

**State Control is now Removed :**

**RAILWAY FARES AND FREIGHTS  
ARE CHEAPER, COAL IS CHEAPER,  
and the EXPORT TRADE REVIVING.**

### **WORKMEN OF BRITAIN !**

**DO YOU WANT** Industrial Conscription ?

**DO YOU WANT** to be sent by Labour Dictators from place to place, from job to job, without having a say in the matter ?

**DO YOU WANT** only one-tenth of the food necessary to keep you alive ?

**DO YOU WANT** to be shot if you take a holiday without permission ?

**DO YOU WANT** to abolish all family life, religion, freedom of speech and the Press, Trade Unions and the Co-operative Societies ?

**IF NOT—**

**VOTE AGAINST**

**THE LABOUR - SOCIALIST**

Figure 3.1. *Empire Record*, December 1922, p. 5.

It placed 'red scare' advertisements in a number of local and national newspapers, including one which warned:

If You Don't Want Revolution, Ruined Trade, Industrial War, Strikes, Tyranny of Officials, Workshop Dictators, Industrial Conscription, Misery and Starvation, VOTE AGAINST THE LABOUR-SOCIALISTS...EVERY ANTI-SOCIALIST VOTE IS NEEDED.<sup>405</sup>

The NCU intervened in the campaign with a detailed questionnaire for candidates, which it utilised in deciding which candidates to endorse, and also to promote NCU policies among future MPs. The questionnaire was only intended for anti-socialist candidates, as '[h]aving examined the manifesto of the Labour Party, the Union must oppose any candidate pledged to that policy'.<sup>406</sup> After the Conservative victory the *New Voice* praised the role of NCU members who had campaigned for the Constitutionalist cause.<sup>407</sup>

During the 1923 general election campaign the BEU urged its members to actively support the Conservative government. It described apathy as the greatest danger to the Constitutionalist cause and appealed for funds to enable the organisation to maximise its effectiveness.<sup>408</sup> The organisation campaigned in 65 constituencies and claimed that where it was active the results bucked the national trend and generally saw Labour candidates defeated. At Coventry, the election of left-wing socialist, A. A.

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<sup>405</sup> Reproduced in *Empire Record*, December 1922, p. 12.

<sup>406</sup> *New Voice*, November 1922, pp. 9, 12.

<sup>407</sup> *New Voice*, December 1922, p. 6.

<sup>408</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1923, p. 4.

Purcell, was blamed on the absence of a BEU campaign due to lack of funds.<sup>409</sup> The NCU Grand Council on 16 November reaffirmed the organisation's 'Non-Party attitude, excepting as to Socialist candidates' and approved a draft questionnaire for candidates along similar lines to that used in the previous general election.<sup>410</sup>

The eventual advent of a minority Labour government following the election exposed many of the more outlandish right-wing criticisms of the Labour Party. As the new government's moderation became apparent, however, the BEU and NCU adapted their propaganda. The *Empire Record* suggested that Labour's policy of 'gradualness' had been forced upon the government by its lack of a parliamentary majority. While the government's policies taken separately appeared 'humane and popular', all the proposals meant heavier expenditure, and when the bills came in they would 'break the overburdened back of industry'.<sup>411</sup> Furthermore, the BEU suggested, the strategy of hiding Labour's true aims was still in place, until such time as the socialists were strong enough to remove the 'mask of moderation'. In an article entitled 'Some Dangers of the Socialist Government', Reginald Wilson portrayed MacDonald as a 'most astute politician' deliberately trying to 'entrap' the electorate. The 'real Socialist and Communist programme was not mentioned; it was relegated to the background'.<sup>412</sup>

At a public meeting organised by the Edinburgh branch of the NCU on 3 March 1924 Lord Askwith stressed that while Ramsay MacDonald had recently spoken in support of individuality, this did not represent the views of his followers, particularly 'the extreme element, who were the tail endeavouring to wag the dog'. By championing

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<sup>409</sup> *BEU, Annual Report*, 1923, p. 13.

<sup>410</sup> *New Voice*, December 1923, p. 9.

<sup>411</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1924, p. 55.

<sup>412</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1924, p. 184.

excessive welfare spending, Labour was encouraging ‘those who liked to be spoon-fed by the State’, rather than those hardy individualists who had made the Empire great. The president of the local Rotary Club read a message from Professor Charles Sarolea expressing his view of the new administration:

The history of the first few weeks of the Labour Government had led the majority of unsophisticated British citizens to the belief that Socialism was after all only a bogey to frighten the simple and credulous. That innocuous beginning did not reassure him for the future. He was convinced that the mildest experiment in State Socialism might prove more fatal to the commercial prosperity of the country than Bolshevism. Bolshevism was like a high fever. State Socialism was a lingering disease.<sup>413</sup>

The first Labour government was also a powerful stimulus for the idea of anti-socialist unity. The *New Voice* of February 1924 contained numerous articles and letters on the need for cooperation between ‘Constitutionalist’ forces. It also reported a ‘Great NCU Protest Meeting’ against the new government which carried a resolution calling on all Anti-Socialist MPs irrespective of party, to suspend minor issues and cooperate in maintaining a Government which will truly reflect the opinion of the country’.<sup>414</sup> The debate on how to fight socialism during elections continued through to the summer when the NCU annual conference rejected motions calling for it to set up a new anti-socialist Centre Party independent of the three major parties. Lord Askwith assured delegates

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<sup>413</sup> *Scotsman*, 4 March 1924.

<sup>414</sup> *New Voice*, February 1924, p. 4.

‘most definitely and earnestly that the Central Executive had no intention whatsoever of supporting any idea of the formation of a Fourth or Centre Party’.<sup>415</sup>

Both the BEU and the NCU gave prominent attention to the issues which eventually forced the minority Labour government back to the polls to seek a more considerable public endorsement. The question of the proposed Russian loan was regarded as an act of ‘crass stupidity’ by the BEU, while it castigated the government for ‘interfering with justice’ in the Campbell Case, in which the prosecution for sedition of J. R. Campbell, editor of the CPGB newspaper, the *Weekly Worker*, was dropped following pressure from Labour Ministers.<sup>416</sup> The NCU gave the Campbell case a good deal of attention, claiming that it was one of its own members who had brought the offending article in the *Weekly Worker* to the attention of the NCU Central Executive on 25 July, which had then informed the authorities via one of the organisation’s parliamentary supporters.<sup>417</sup>

Reginald Wilson of the BEU ended his attack on the government with a rousing call to action:

The greatest advantage...enjoyed by the present Socialist Government consists in the apathy and indifference of those who are opposed to their proposals.... Rates and taxes will go up unless anti-Socialists cease bewailing their fate, come off their perches and fight their enemies. Let us have more backbone and less wish-

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<sup>415</sup> *New Voice*, July 1924, p. 8.

<sup>416</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1924, p. 185.

<sup>417</sup> *New Voice*, October 1924, p. 3; November 1924, p. 9.

bone and we shall win.... The Socialists have obtained control by steady effort, self-sacrifice and organisation. Only by similar methods will they be defeated.<sup>418</sup>

In the election which followed soon after these words were written, the activists of the BEU and the NCU, and Conservatives generally, certainly got off their perches and showed some backbone, or at least bared their anti-socialist teeth, contributing to a landslide victory for Stanley Baldwin. The BEU produced and distributed a special 16 page pamphlet for the election entitled *Some Dangers of the Present Socialist Government*, as well as around 150,000 leaflets. It also distributed 100,000 miniature Union Jack flags among voters.<sup>419</sup> In London the BEU concentrated its anti-Labour campaign in ten constituencies. Eight saw increased majorities for sitting 'Constitutional' candidates; while two were gained from Labour.<sup>420</sup> Outside the capital the BEU claimed that its efforts were focused on a number of 'black spots', alleged 'centres of Socialist and revolutionary infection' where Labour was strong (Figure 3.2). There were limitations in the BEU's coverage of the 'black spots', however. Important Labour strongholds like South Wales and South Yorkshire were neglected, for instance, while a major campaign was mounted by the organisation in the Home Counties and the West Country, areas already dominated by the Conservative and Liberal parties. The BEU did take its message to some of the 'black spots'. Unlike London and the South, however, its efforts in these districts resulted in a mixed bag of success and disappointment.

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<sup>418</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1924, p. 185.

<sup>419</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1924, p. 13; BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, p. 6.

<sup>420</sup> BEU, *Annual Report, 1924*, pp. 4, 15. Those held were Brixton, Chelsea, Hampstead, Holborn, Kensington North, Putney, Westminster Abbey, and Wimbledon; those gained were Greenwich and Hammersmith North.





In the Midlands the BEU ‘opened its campaign early and our speakers frequently addressed crowds of over 1,000 people’. In Birmingham, in particular, the election work of the Midlands Organiser, Captain Owen-Lewis, was energetic and courteous and had left the organisation with ‘a very high standing’ in the city. Further successful electioneering was carried out by BEU organisers at Oswestry, Shropshire, and the Staffordshire Potteries<sup>422</sup> BEU speakers mounted a ‘whirlwind campaign’ in Northampton in support of the Conservatives’ attempt to unseat Margaret Bondfield, Britain’s first female Cabinet Minister. The organisation claimed that its efforts had ‘largely contributed’ to her defeat in what had been regarded as a safe Labour seat.<sup>423</sup> The BEU organised over 20 meetings in the constituency, and claimed that ‘some 25,000 people listened to our speakers, Mr. F. Tongue and Capt. Pearson’.<sup>424</sup> During one incident – in the town square, following a speech by Bondfield – Tongue and Pearson, accompanied by a number of female supporters, attempted to address the crowd from the back of a Ford van festooned with Union Jacks. The crowd of mainly Labour supporters rushed the van and tore down one of the larger flags. Tongue was allegedly assaulted with a stick, while Pearson ‘retaliated upon a man who attempted to strike him’.<sup>425</sup> Although the incident passed off without further trouble, it was held up as yet another example of ‘Labour-Socialist rowdiness’ by the BEU. The alleged disdain shown towards the Union Jack was posited as further evidence of Labour’s lack of patriotism; and prompted the *Empire Record* to print a poem attacking those who had defiled the ‘Red,

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<sup>422</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1924, pp. 14-15.

<sup>423</sup> BEU, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 5.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>425</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1924, p. 13; *The Times*, 25 October 1924.

White and Blue'.<sup>426</sup> On the eve of the poll, the BEU organised a rally in Northampton in support of the 'Constitutional cause'. It was addressed by the BEU President, Lord Danesfort, who stated that the question before the people was:

Were we going to uproot all the social and economic institutions of the country to embark upon wild experiments which wherever tried had proved disastrous failures, or were we going to send back to power a sound steady and stable Government under which the people could prosper...?<sup>427</sup>

Remarking on the election campaign generally, the BEU annual report for 1924 noted that in most regards the organisation's efforts were 'most satisfactory'; and looked forward to making even greater inroads on Labour's support in the future. It pointed out, however, that future success was entirely dependent on increased money and members.<sup>428</sup>

The NCU was also active in the campaign. It produced notes for speakers and drafted a series of questions to put to Labour candidates designed to put them on the spot regarding their party's economic policies.<sup>429</sup> The organisation was particularly keen to prevent a split in the anti-socialist vote:

To this end the Union declares in favour of negotiations between the local political associations with a view to concentrating support for the Anti-Socialist candidate regarded as having the greater prospect of success in this election.

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<sup>426</sup> *Empire Record*, *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>428</sup> BEU, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 4.

<sup>429</sup> *New Voice*, November 1924, pp. 6, 16.

Therefore NCU branches in constituencies at present represented by Socialists or where a three-cornered contest is anticipated, are urged immediately to make representations to the bodies respectively concerned.<sup>430</sup>

Municipal politics was another crucial arena in which the anti-socialist right confronted the challenge of Labour. In many localities formal alliances or electoral pacts between Conservative and Liberal organisations developed, again designed to circumvent 'the triangle' of three-party politics, which was tending to benefit Labour in working-class districts. The pressure groups of the anti-socialist right were often at the forefront of local movements for unity among 'moderates'.

Developments in municipal elections were a factor in the growing awareness of the national threat from Labour. The 'most dramatic' evidence of Labour's advance came in the municipal elections of November 1919. These were the first to be held since 1913, and were open to roughly double the electorate of that year. There was a low turnout which distorted the result; but this could not mask the fact that the elections marked 'a massive breakthrough for Labour'. Labour gains in Britain's larger towns in 1919 were 'nothing short of sensational'. This confirmation of the party's increased strength was a major factor precipitating the formation of anti-socialist pacts.<sup>431</sup>

These took a variety of forms, depending on local traditions and circumstances. Chris Cook points out that in some areas the need for co-operation was negligible, as 'the Liberal Party had all but disappeared'.<sup>432</sup> More typical, however, were those localities where 'Conservatives and Liberals combined to defeat Labour, either by a formal

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<sup>430</sup> *New Voice*, December 1924, p. 3

<sup>431</sup> C. Cook, *The Age of Alignment: Electoral politics in Britain 1922-29*, Macmillan, London (1972), p. 51.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52-5.

amalgamation or by means of an electoral pact'. Examples include the Sheffield Citizen's Association, the Crewe Progressive Union, the Derby Municipal Alliance, and Swindon's Citizen's League.<sup>433</sup> Such bodies encompassed a wide range of local middle-class, business and political opinion, united in common antipathy to socialism. The Durham Municipal and County Federation, formed in Autumn 1921, for example, included local branches of the Anti-Nationalisation Society, the Durham Federation of Property Owners and Ratepayers' Associations, Durham County Unionist Associations, the Durham and North Yorkshire Chambers of Trade, the Middle Classes Union, the County Farmers' Union, and the North Eastern Area Coalition Liberal Party.<sup>434</sup> The Glasgow Good Government Committee (later the Good Government League), formed in 1920, represented the Glasgow Unionist Association, the Glasgow Liberal Council, the Women's Citizens' Association, the Citizens' Union, the Rotary Club, the City Business Club, the Citizens' Vigilance Association, the YMCA, the National Council of Women, and the Scottish Middle Classes Union.<sup>435</sup> Looser anti-socialist co-operation existed in places like Wolverhampton and Coventry, where 'although no formal amalgamation of Conservatives and Liberals for municipal purposes took place, the two parties had a written pact to maintain a united anti-Labour front'.<sup>436</sup> The investigations of Davies and Morley have shown that anti-socialist alliances and pacts became a ubiquitous feature of municipal politics during the inter-war period.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>434</sup> *The Times*, 30 September 1921.

<sup>435</sup> J. J. Smyth, 'Resisting Labour: Unionists, Liberals, and Moderates in Glasgow Between the Wars', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (June 2003), pp. 381-2.

<sup>436</sup> Cook, *The Age of Alignment...*, p. 58.

<sup>437</sup> S. Davies and B. Morley, *County Borough Elections...*

The BEU and the MCU/NCU played a role in encouraging such alliances and agreements. Both organisations recognised the growing importance of local politics and were acutely aware that Labour success at the local level might eventually translate into parliamentary success. In December 1925 the *Empire Record* emphasised the national importance of municipal elections and criticised those who were ‘inclined to regard them in a parochial spirit’. It pointed out that Labour leaders like MacDonald and Sidney Webb viewed municipal power as an important stepping-stone to parliamentary power. Indeed, it contended, a Labour majority on a local council was worse than the return of a solitary socialist MP. The BEU painted a bleak picture of what might occur if Labour’s municipal policies were carried to their conclusion:

...the local application of Socialist theories is regarded solely as a step towards their national application. The destruction of the present system of Society is the Socialists’ aim. If industries can be locally ‘municipalised’, if Municipal control can be imposed upon the necessities of life, that is a great step forward in the Socialists’ universal nationalisation programme and in the war on capitalism. The killing of private enterprise in certain areas...is a sure forerunner to the destruction of private enterprise throughout the country.<sup>438</sup>

The MCU/NCU also regarded high levels of middle class participation in municipal elections as a vital means of halting Labour’s advance:

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<sup>438</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1925, p. 9.

In Municipal voting especially we all have a direct and close interest, and yet too many of us pay no heed to the Municipal elections and are content to leave the voting to those who like to bother about it.... Has it ever occurred to you to notice the strong and increasing hold that Labour members are getting on our Municipal bodies, and how the Middle Class householder has to sweat for it? <sup>439</sup>

The message was clear: where 'Socialist-Labour' was in the majority rates went up. To prevent this calamity middle-class voters were urged to 'go to election meetings and listen to the speeches and promises, and heckle stoutly as occasion offers'.<sup>440</sup> The anti-socialist right did much more than simply encouraging heckling, however. The MCU/NCU stood many candidates in municipal elections across the country during the 1920s; and the BEU was outspoken in its support for anti-socialist candidates. The MCU/NCU, in particular, became a significant player in local politics in a number of towns and districts.

Although the 1919 municipal elections are rightly seen as the catalyst for the widespread formation of anti-socialist alliances, examples of cross-party and 'non-political' initiatives against Labour already existed in many localities. In large part this was a reflection of the co-operation between Conservatives and Liberals which underpinned the Coalition government. It was also influenced by the activities of the anti-socialist right. In Eastbourne party labels were eschewed by anti-socialist councillors who preferred to be known as Independents. As Davies and Morley make clear, however, the label was misleading and such councillors 'were, in both policy and speech, of a

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<sup>439</sup> *New Voice*, April 1920, p. 5.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*

conservative persuasion'. These 'Independents' received support from a variety of middle-class pressure groups, the 'most notable' of which was the MCU, which was 'very active in the Eastbourne area' and achieved some prominence in the borough's politics in 1919-20, and again in the late 1920s as the NCU.<sup>441</sup> In Brighton in 1919 seven MCU candidates were elected to the borough council.<sup>442</sup> A year later seven more stood on the MCU ticket, five of whom were elected. In 1921 three out of six were successful, though this time they did not use the MCU label. Davies and Morley suggest that this signalled the end of this 'short-lived political diversion';<sup>443</sup> but the following year the organisation was still making an impact on local politics, campaigning for the closure of the town's aquarium. The MCU branch Chairman, himself a town councillor, opposed all moves to keep the site in public ownership, claiming that 'The town cannot run it at a profit...because, as with everything controlled by a public body, there would be too many highly-paid officials'.<sup>444</sup>

Following on the successes of Labour in municipal elections in 1919 the MCU and BEU campaigned vigorously against middle-class apathy. Such campaigns, along with a number of well publicised rate rises, played a part in raising voter turnout significantly in 1920.<sup>445</sup> This led to a marked decline in Labour victories, with 548 out of 747 Labour candidates defeated. There was no major change in the number of openly Liberal and Conservative candidates returned, however, and it was often 'Independents, standing as rate reducers', who received the most votes. The Chairman of the MCU, Pretyman Newman, stated that the setback for Labour was 'not a Conservative victory,

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<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, pp. 516-19, 530.

<sup>442</sup> *The Times*, 3 November 1919.

<sup>443</sup> Davies and Morley, Vol. 2, pp. 122-3.

<sup>444</sup> *The Times*, 11 September 1922.

<sup>445</sup> *New Voice*, November 1920, p. 7.

but a victory against municipal extravagance'. He pointed out that Conservatives, Liberals and even what he described as 'ratepaying Labour' jointly contributed to the results, which he hailed as 'a victory of ratepayers at last aroused to action'.<sup>446</sup>

Despite Pretzman Newman's non-party claims, however, the vast majority of 'Independent' candidates were Conservatives or anti-socialist Liberals, combining to keep Labour out of office, and committed to drastic 'economies' in local and national expenditure. A large number of them stood explicitly as MCU supporters. In April 1920 the *New Voice* reported MCU councillors elected at Watford, Uxbridge, Twickenham, Ilford and Weston-Super-Mare.<sup>447</sup> The organisation claimed to have run or supported nearly 300 candidates in November 1920, the large majority of whom were successful. In many towns and cities, including Liverpool, Southampton, Leeds, Yeovil, Ipswich and Wolverhampton, all the candidates supported by the MCU were elected. The numbers of MCU sponsored candidates varied considerably, however, with 23 in Liverpool and 21 in Southampton, but only one standing in Sheffield and two in Newcastle-on-Tyne.<sup>448</sup>

Six out of eight MCU candidates were elected at Chester in 1920, where a year earlier the local branch had organised meetings to campaign against the council's plans for building projects and other subsidised schemes, due to their cost. At one of these a local MCU member pointed out that the organisation was 'without party purpose' and that both Tories and Liberals could be members. Consequently, although the two parties continued to fight elections under their own party labels, the influence of the MCU and the Chester Ratepayers' Association ensured that an electoral pact existed from 1920

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<sup>446</sup> *The Times*, 3 November 1920.

<sup>447</sup> *New Voice*, April 1920, p. 3.

<sup>448</sup> *New Voice*, November 1920, p. 7.



onwards, providing ‘a rock-solid base for their joint domination of the council chamber’.<sup>449</sup>

In 1921 the MCU again devoted significant efforts to intervening in municipal contests. Anti-waste was the major theme of local politics at this time and the MCU joined with the London Municipal Society and Municipal Reform in attacking the ‘spendthrift tendency throughout the country’. The MCU expected to ‘use its influence in about 100 elections’ to urban district councils in April.<sup>450</sup> As the county borough elections approached that Autumn, MCU Branches were instructed to ‘give consideration to the action of other organisations’ when deciding whether or not to stand candidates. It was stated that ‘Where the objects of...such bodies are in general accord with those of the MCU, negotiations may result in cooperation. It is hoped that unity of action will prevent the nomination of rival anti-waste candidates’. A list of twelve questions was drawn up by the MCU to enable electors to ascertain each candidate’s level of commitment to middle-class interests.<sup>451</sup> Overall, out of 62 MCU candidates 45 were elected; and out of the 272 other candidates supported by the MCU 231 were elected.

Among those places where MCU influence was felt was Cardiff, where the local branch, which had nearly doubled in size in the preceding year and claimed 1,412 members, lent its support to five Coalitionists and a Liberal. From 1922 an informal anti-Labour pact held sway and the NCU supported a variety of Conservative, Liberal, Independent and Ratepayer candidates, until a more formal anti-socialist alliance was formed in 1928.<sup>452</sup> At Leyton Labour successes in the municipal elections of 1920 led to

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<sup>449</sup> Davies and Morley, Vol. 3, pp. 16-19.

<sup>450</sup> *The Times*, 18 January 1921.

<sup>451</sup> *The Times*, 11 October 1921.

<sup>452</sup> Davies and Morley, Vol. 2, 520-6.

a joint campaign by the MCU and the local Ratepayers' Association against a 'soaring combined rate', culminating in the 1921 defeat of council plans for a staff superannuation scheme, improved borrowing facilities, and increased powers for street improvements. This experience strengthened the anti-Labour forces in the district and although the election of 1921 produced stalemate, from 1922 until 1926 local government in Leyton was dominated by the Ratepayers' Association.<sup>453</sup> In Richmond the MCU 'gave vocal support to any candidate who opposed the Labour Party, be they Conservative, Liberal or Independent'. Members included the former Mayor of Richmond, Dr. Lewis G. Hunt, and a number of councillors and aldermen.<sup>454</sup> In neighbouring Twickenham the MCU branch was strongly represented on local councils in the early 1920s. In April 1921 MCU members won all eight of the seats up for election for Twickenham Urban District Council. In February 1922 two NCU candidates were returned unopposed to sit on Middlesex County Council; and a month later two more district councillors were added to the organisation's tally.<sup>455</sup>

On 17, 24, and 31 October 1921 the BEU placed large advertisements in the 'principal Sunday Newspapers which appeal to the working classes' attacking Bolshevism and the Labour Party. The organisation's Chairman and Treasurer, in a confidential letter to business backers, suggested there was 'every reason to believe that

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<sup>453</sup> 'Leyton: Local government and public services', in W. R. Powell (ed.), *A History of the County of Essex: Volume 6*, Victoria County History, Woodbridge (1973), pp. 205-214. Accessed at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42770> on 24 October 2007.

<sup>454</sup> Woodbridge, 'The National Citizens' Union in Richmond...', pp. 85-7.

<sup>455</sup> M. Lee, 'The Origins of the York House Society' (text of an address given to the Society on 19 September 2003). Accessed at <http://www.twickenham-museum.org.uk/paper.asp?PaperID=9> on 24 October 2007.

they were largely responsible for the overwhelming defeat which was suffered by the Labour and Socialist Candidates at the Municipal Elections on November 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>456</sup>

Following municipal elections in November 1922, which saw set-backs for Labour, Lord Askwith hailed the NCU's 'active opposition to Communism and Socialism' as a major factor in the return of '124 NCU candidates out of a total of 145'.<sup>457</sup> The *New Voice* celebrated the fact that 'Socialism in the municipalities has received a smashing blow. It must be followed up again and again, until the final "knock-out" is delivered. The NCU can deliver that blow, and in the succeeding rounds vigilance and preparation must be continuous, zealous and confident'.<sup>458</sup>

During the run up to the London County Council election of 2 March 1922 the BEU Executive Committee announced that it was organising 'a band of voluntary workers who would give their services to any candidates opposing Labour-Socialists and Communists who may need assistance'; and appealed to all its supporters to 'take an active part in canvassing others and bringing them to the poll'. This was prompted by its fear that Labour's 'programme would prove in practice a serious menace to the solvency and good administration of the Council as well as to private enterprise, and to the interests of all citizens and rate-payers'.<sup>459</sup> When campaigning began the BEU made an 'intensive' effort 'in those districts where the Red influence was strongest'. The organisation claimed that it 'did not support any candidate', due to its strict 'Non-Party-Policy'. It merely 'recommended voters not to elect the Labour-Socialists and gave them many reasons why they would suffer if they did'. The BEU stated that it had:

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<sup>456</sup> Modern Records Centre, Warwick, Iron and Steel Trades Confederation papers, MSS.36/A24/2.

<sup>457</sup> *The Times*, 4 November 1922.

<sup>458</sup> *New Voice*, December 1922, p. 6.

<sup>459</sup> *The Times*, 14 February, 1 March 1922; *Empire Record*, February 1922, p. 47.

Played an important – and perhaps a decisive – part in averting the danger which threatened London. The threat was not from Labour, but from the sinister revolutionary element which professes to speak on behalf of Labour.<sup>460</sup>

During the metropolitan borough elections in November the BEU claimed to have organised 100 meetings a week in the three weeks preceding the poll, utilising the slogan: ‘Get the Labour-Socialists out and the rates will come down!’ A year later, it claimed that Londoners had as a whole had saved over £3,750,000 resulting from reduced rates prompted by their rejection of municipal socialism, and asked that voters take this into account and consider making a donation to the BEU fighting fund.<sup>461</sup>

The BEU felt that it was due to their speakers that a ‘Moderate Member’ for Walsall town council was returned in the May 1923 elections with a two-to-one majority against an opponent ‘holding extreme socialist views’.<sup>462</sup> During the borough elections of November, however, the BEU was forced to admit that ‘owing to lack of support’ it ‘was unable to carry on...a vigorous and widespread counter-campaign’ when Labour attempted to regain the seats it had lost the previous year. The set-backs were blamed on voter apathy. As soon as rates had been reduced ‘many electors promptly forgot the need for vigilance’. In those cities where the BEU was able to mount an effective and continuous counter-propaganda, however, such as Birmingham and Liverpool it was noted that the results were far more satisfactory.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> *Empire Record*, April 1922, p. 71.

<sup>461</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1923, p. 12.

<sup>462</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1923, p. 100.

<sup>463</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1923, p. 12.

In municipal elections held in April 1924 NCU candidates were again successful in a number of localities, including Portslade, Hearne Bay, New Malden, Camberley, and Sutton.<sup>464</sup> In local elections held in the same week as the 1924 general election the BEU claimed to have made ‘every effort...to rouse constitutional electors to do their duty at the polls’. Set-backs for Labour candidates in a number of localities, including Northampton and Portsmouth, were deemed to be a result of BEU activity. This was particularly true of Birmingham, where a large and active branch ensured that ‘the Socialists were routed’. The BEU’s local organiser, Captain Owen-Lewis, was returned by a record majority over his Socialist opponent’; and other notable successes were recorded across the city.<sup>465</sup> Results in other parts of the country were less impressive, however. Although ‘the mass attack of the Socialists’ was defeated, Labour’s municipal representation overall had increased. Again, this was blamed on voter apathy and the fact that, unlike Birmingham, these localities did not have the BEU on hand to expose the red menace behind Labour’s moderate façade:

Where the Constitutional party acted together, stirred up the ratepayers, and emphasised the importance of sane and economical Municipal government, they carried the day without difficulty. It is slackness in propaganda that leads to apathy among the electors.<sup>466</sup>

In early 1925, bolstered by the Conservative success in the general election and its own minor triumphs in Birmingham and Northampton, the BEU focused its attention on

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<sup>464</sup> *New Voice*, May 1924, p. 8.

<sup>465</sup> BEU, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 6; *Empire Record*, December 1924, p. 4.

<sup>466</sup> *Empire Record*, *ibid.*

attacking Labour's remaining footholds in the municipalities. The organisation's annual report for 1924 stated that 'having worked hard to help remove...MacDonald and his supporters from the control of the country' it would now 'start a systematic campaign...for the removal of Socialist representation on the City, Borough and County Councils, Boards of Guardians and other local authorities'.<sup>467</sup> This ambitious plan rested on the ability of Conservatives and other 'Constitutionalists' to maintain the unity evinced in the electoral battles of the previous year; for there was abundant evidence that despite the continued attempts to portray Labour as the thin end of a Bolshevist wedge, increasing numbers of voters were supporting the party's candidates. The BEU noted ruefully that despite the Conservative landslide in the general election 'Socialist and Communist candidates obtained a million more votes than they secured in 1923'.<sup>468</sup> The NCU was also concerned that the stability heralded by the new Conservative government should not lead to apathy among the municipal electorate. It insisted that 'the Socialists, sailing falsely under a "labour" flag, must be prevented from boarding the smaller ships of state represented by the local bodies'.<sup>469</sup>

BEU and NCU fears concerning Labour's continued popularity were confirmed in the municipal elections of 1925. Despite the fact that the anti-socialist Municipal Reform retained overall control in the London County Council elections in March, the advance of Labour at the expense of the [Liberal] Progressive Party was regarded as most disquieting by the BEU, which despite its best efforts, was unable to impact upon the result in a number of seats.<sup>470</sup> In December the *Empire Record* stated that the results of the

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<sup>467</sup> BEU, *Annual Report*, 1924, p. 3.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>469</sup> *New Voice*, January 1925, p. 5.

<sup>470</sup> *Empire Record*, April 1925, pp. 72-3.

November municipal elections were ‘not a cause of congratulation for the Constitutional parties’. Labour again made significant gains in London and in a number of provincial cities and boroughs. In Scotland, however, the party was routed, ‘the Socialists being in a general minority of less than one-third of the full representation’; and overall, the BEU took some comfort that Labour had not, despite ‘a most determined effort’, been able to repeat its 1919 level of success. The organisation claimed, furthermore, that in areas where it had been active, the national trend in favour of Labour had been reversed. In London the BEU organised ninety-six open-air meetings and distributed over 18,000 leaflets. Although overall in London Labour made a net gain of 90 seats and gained control of two boroughs to add to their existing six, of the 18 boroughs in which the BEU was active only Shoreditch saw Labour increase its control. The *Empire Record* stated that ‘we have every reason to congratulate ourselves’, regarding the campaign as a vindication of the BEU’s consistent anti-socialist activity, which combined all-year-round propaganda work with intensive ‘whirlwind’ campaigning at election times. In London the BEU trebled the number of outdoor speaking staff it generally employed and made a special point of holding meetings in ‘spots which were regarded as so “unhealthy” that they were generally avoided by other propagandists’. These included Hoxton, and the ‘notorious’ West Ham, where the organisation held three meetings at the request of the local ratepayers’ association. The BEU claimed that its efforts contributed to Labour’s loss of five seats in West Ham and had removed socialist representation in Wimbledon.<sup>471</sup>

The BEU claimed significant success in Birmingham. Not only did all the sitting anti-Socialist candidates retain their seats, but the organisation’s intensive election campaign, building on year-long work in the city, was held to be responsible for four new

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<sup>471</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1925, pp. 8-9.

seats 'won from the Socialists in the poorest parts of the city'. Much of this success was due to the efforts of Captain Owen-Lewis, the BEU Midland organiser, himself a city councillor. He had spoken at 'many crowded meetings in several wards', designed and composed an election poster which was praised in the *Birmingham Mail*, and had secured the loan of a large lorry which toured the city on polling day 'packed with children singing patriotic songs'.<sup>472</sup>

The operation of anti-socialist alliances in the localities ensured that agitation over rates and local expenditure effectively kept Labour from office in town halls across the nation. As keeping the 'Socialists' from power was the *raison d'être* of the BEU and the NCU, they naturally supported such arrangements. Indeed, as the above investigation indicates, in many localities the MCU/NCU acted as a de-facto anti-socialist alliance, while the BEU was a most active participant in the anti-socialist cause. Furthermore, both bodies campaigned for the application of such a strategy at the national level and therefore contributed to the remarkable electoral success of the Conservative Party during this period.

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<sup>472</sup> *Empire Record*, December 1925, p. 9.



## Chapter 4.

### An 'English Fascisti'? The Anti-Socialist Right and British Fascism.

Benewick long ago suggested that the right-wing anti-socialist pressure groups of the 1920s, including the British Empire Union and the National Citizen's Union, were among the precursors of British fascism.<sup>473</sup> Such linkages reflect most historians' understanding of the development of the British fascist movement, giving deserved attention to its domestic antecedents.<sup>474</sup> Some observers have gone beyond this to suggest that these organisations were themselves 'semi-fascist' or even simply 'fascist'.<sup>475</sup> Many historians, however, reject such a direct correlation between the right-wing Conservatism of these groups and 'genuine' fascism, which, they contend, only appeared in Britain in any meaningful sense after Oswald Mosley's adoption of the creed in 1932.<sup>476</sup> This interpretation is complicated by the existence in the 1920s of a number of avowedly 'Fascist' organisations, the nature of which have divided historians.<sup>477</sup> In some respects

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<sup>473</sup> R. Benewick, *The Fascist Movement in Britain*, pp. 39-42.

<sup>474</sup> This premise underpins a number of studies, including Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain...*; Linehan, *British Fascism...*; D. Stone, *Breeding Superman: Nietzsche, Race and Eugenics in Edwardian and Interwar Britain*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool (2000); and M. Pugh, 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' *Fascists and Fascism in Britain between the Wars*, Jonathan Cape, London (2005).

<sup>475</sup> M. Ruotsila, 'The Antisemitism of the Eighth Duke of Northumberland's the *Patriot*, 1922-1930', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2004), p. 89; J. Hope, 'Fascism and the State: The Case of the British Fascists', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (December 1993), p. 371.

<sup>476</sup> Benewick, pp. 28-9; S. G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-45*, UCL, London (1995), p. 304; D. Baker, 'The Extreme Right in the 1920s...', p. 14.

<sup>477</sup> C. Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, Barrie and Rockliff, London (1961), pp. 55-64; Benewick, pp. 27-47; R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39*, Constable, London (1980), pp. 85-96; Farr, 'The British Fascisti...', pp. 255-77; Farr, *The Development and Impact...*, pp. 53-80; Thurlow, pp. 51-76; K. Lunn, 'The Ideology and Impact of the British Fascists in the 1920s' in T. Kushner and K. Lunn (eds.), *Traditions of Intolerance: Historical Perspectives on Fascism and Race Discourse in Britain*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (1989), pp. 140-54; J. Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism: Women in Britain's Fascist Movement 1923-1945*, I. B. Tauris, London (2000), pp. 11-42; Linehan, pp. 61-79; 124-8; J. Morell, 'Arnold Leese and the Imperial Fascist League: the impact of Racial Fascism', in K. Lunn and R. Thurlow (eds.), *British Fascism: Essays on the Radical Right in Inter-War Britain*, Croom Helm, London (1980), pp. 57-75.

these organisations – particularly the British Fascists (BF) – were remarkably similar to contemporary anti-socialist pressure groups.<sup>478</sup> Initially, both the BEU and NCU evinced a keen interest in and a level of sympathy towards Italian Fascism; and the NCU for a short time even styled itself the ‘English Fascisti’. Despite this, studies which set out to discuss the relationship between the Conservative right and fascism in the 1920s pay little attention to these bodies.<sup>479</sup> This chapter will examine the contemporary discourse of the BEU and NCU on the question of fascism.

It is necessary to understand how fascism was perceived in Britain in the 1920s. This helps us to appreciate how organisations which might not have been fascist in the sense understood by some modern scholars were at times happy to lay claim to the epithet – and, even when they were not, frequently had it bestowed upon them by their enemies. Contemporary opinion often regarded Mussolini’s Italian Fascist movement as a more aggressive counterpart to British organisations like the BEU and the NCU. The Italian Fascisti were described in 1922 by one British commentator as ‘a strike-breaking anti-Bolshevist organisation composed mostly of the young men of the better classes who turn out like special constables to keep order, and to keep things going in factories, hotels etc., when workmen strike’.<sup>480</sup> The Italy correspondent of *The Times* reported that ‘Originally they were a sort of middle-class union against the disruptive forces which were eating into the Italian State and economic life’. He pointed out that the Fascisti claimed to be ‘progressive Conservatives’; and while subsequently the movement became ‘something much more alive than a middle-class union’, and ‘spread into all classes and

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<sup>478</sup> Benewick, p. 28; Griffiths (p. 86) describes the BF as ‘basically a Conservative movement, obsessed by the dangers of civil emergency’.

<sup>479</sup> Webber, ‘Intolerance and Discretion...’, p. 162; Baker, ‘The Extreme Right in the 1920s...’, pp. 17-18; Pugh, p. 86.

<sup>480</sup> C. Repington, *After the War: A Diary*, Constable, London (1922), p. 60.

split Labour in twain', its main goal remained political and physical opposition to 'disruptive organisations'.<sup>481</sup> In a speech to the Young Liberal Federation in January 1925 Lloyd George pointed out that Conservatives and the middle classes generally had welcomed Fascism in 1923 as a powerful new remedy for Bolshevism:

he remembered the joy in Tory circles here. There was not a first-class carriage which did not ring with songs of praise for Mussolini. If they scratched a Conservative they found a Fascist.<sup>482</sup>

The political representatives of the British labour movement viewed developments very differently, but saw fascism in broadly similar terms, often employing the expression with regard to domestic developments. Labour Party MPs, including Emanuel Shinwell and Josiah Wedgwood, regarded fascism primarily as a strike-breaking force.<sup>483</sup> In the months running up to the General Strike of 1926 the Communist Party of Great Britain declared that the formation of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies was 'the most definite step towards organised Fascism yet made in this country'.<sup>484</sup> Such views reverberated throughout the labour movement at this time.<sup>485</sup>

It may be argued that such contemporaries wholly misunderstood the essence of fascism. This criticism is not only levelled by modern academics. At least one contemporary British supporter of Mussolini pointed out that many of his conservative

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<sup>481</sup> *The Times*, 14 August 1922.

<sup>482</sup> *The Times*, 6 January 1925.

<sup>483</sup> Jeffery and Hennessy, *States of Emergency...*, pp. 75, 83.

<sup>484</sup> *The Times*, 26 September 1925.

<sup>485</sup> See, for example, *The Times*, 8 October 1925.

and nationalist sympathisers misconceived the ideological essence of the new movement. James Strachey Barnes, the principal British representative of the Centre Internationale d'Études sur la Fascisme (CINEF), emphasised the revolutionary nationalism at the heart of fascism, as well as its spiritual and cultural aspects.<sup>486</sup> He was critical of conservatives who regarded it merely in materialistic terms and focused solely on its negative, anti-communist aspect. In 1924 he criticised certain 'Nationalist elements' in Italy for 'denying what is as clear as day to all who have eyes to see, that Fascism is... revolutionary, and are deceiving themselves...with the idea that Fascism has already accomplished its main task and that Italian life will soon resume its normal pre-war aspect, before it was disturbed by the post-war threats of Bolshevism.... [I]t is this same attitude which is chiefly reflected in the foreign press, especially in England'.<sup>487</sup>

Supporters of the BEU welcomed Mussolini's assumption of power. Among the more influential were the proprietor and future proprietor of the *Morning Post*, Lady Bathurst and the Duke of Northumberland, both of whom were Vice-Presidents of the organisation. Fascism offered a beacon of hope to such figures; living proof that the 'Red menace' could be halted. Writing in his magazine, the *Patriot*, in January 1923, Northumberland expressed the view that similar ills to those visited on Italy after the war would face Britain in the near future. By pointing out that fascism had prevented national catastrophe in Italy, he hinted that in Britain, too, fascism might prove necessary.<sup>488</sup> Lady Bathurst also regarded communism as a serious threat, seeing 'the writing on the wall in ten-foot-high crimson letters', a view shared by H. A. Gwynne, editor of the *Morning*

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<sup>486</sup> Linehan, pp. 129-30.

<sup>487</sup> J. S. Barnes, 'The Basis of Fascism', *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 240, No. 489 (July 1924), p. 5.

<sup>488</sup> Quoted in Farr, 'The British Fascisti...', p. 259.

*Post*.<sup>489</sup> Consequently, the newspaper hailed Mussolini's 'defeat of the "Socialist bully"'.<sup>490</sup> While newspapers like *The Times* expressed unease at some of the Blackshirts' excesses, the *Morning Post* had no such inhibitions. Anti-Bolshevism was the litmus test for Bathurst and Northumberland; and, as the situation in Italy 'was simply Mussolini against Lenin', their mouthpiece was not predisposed to find fault in the new government. Support for Fascism in these quarters continued despite concern at the revelation of the Matteotti murder and growing evidence of Mussolini's dictatorial tendencies in 1924-5. In October 1927 the *Morning Post* was still rejoicing that Bolshevism had been routed in Italy by 'trim handsome black shirted lads'.<sup>491</sup>

Northumberland is widely regarded as a central figure of what Thurlow calls 'Conservative fascism', and Pugh terms 'boiled shirt fascism'.<sup>492</sup> The *Patriot* 'became a major mouthpiece for what has been described as the proto-fascist right or the 'conservative fascist tradition'.<sup>493</sup> A number of other leading members of the BEU were associated with organisations laying claim to the mantle of fascism in the 1920s. Some became members of the British Fascists after 1923, including Earl Temple of Stowe,<sup>494</sup> Colonel Charles Burn, Conservative MP for Torquay,<sup>495</sup> Sir Robert Burton Chadwick, Conservative MP for Wallasey,<sup>496</sup> Admiral Sir Edmund Fremantle,<sup>497</sup> and Miss Ethel Almaz Stout, minor novelist, president of the Association of Women Journalists, and a

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<sup>489</sup> Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, Vol. 2, p. 430.

<sup>490</sup> Quoted in R. J. B. Bosworth, 'The British Press, The Conservatives, and Mussolini, 1920-34', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (April 1970), p. 168.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 171-3.

<sup>492</sup> Thurlow, pp. 46-61; Pugh, pp. 75-91.

<sup>493</sup> Ruotsila, 'The Antisemitism of the Eighth Duke of Northumberland's the *Patriot*...', p. 71.

<sup>494</sup> Linehan, p. 154.

<sup>495</sup> *The Times*, 25 February 1925; Linehan, pp. 45, 62, 155; Pugh, p. 58; Benewick, p. 41. Burn was a former *Aide-de-Camp* to King George V, and the son-in-law of Lord Leith of Fyvie, former President of the BEU. (Pugh, p. 63; Benewick, p. 33).

<sup>496</sup> Linehan, pp. 45, 155; *The Times*, 25 February 1925.

<sup>497</sup> Benewick, p. 33; *Empire Record*, October 1921, p. 165.

member of the BEU Executive Committee.<sup>498</sup> Other leading BEU supporters – including Lieutenant-Colonel A. H. Lane, and Prebendary Gough – were also members of H. H. Beamish’s tiny anti-Semitic sect, the Britons, an organisation often cited as an important ideological influence on the later development of British fascism.<sup>499</sup> Gough, described by Ruotsila as the ‘cleric of the nascent British fascists’, consecrated the colours of the British Fascists at the Cenotaph in November 1926.<sup>500</sup> Another leading member of the Britons was Brigadier-General Cyril Prescott-Decie, who sat on the Executive Committee of the BEU from December 1922.<sup>501</sup> Prescott-Decie was the founder and leader of the Loyalty League, which wished to emulate Italian Fascism in Britain.<sup>502</sup> He later became a leading member of the National Fascisti, a breakaway from the BF.<sup>503</sup> Nesta Webster, who sat on the Grand Council of the British Fascists in 1926/7 and spoke and wrote for the organisation,<sup>504</sup> often graced the platform at BEU meetings, and her publications were regularly advertised and endorsed in the pages of the *Empire Record*.<sup>505</sup>

While these linkages indicate a level of kinship between the first British organisations claiming to be fascist and some leading members of the BEU they are not sufficient to tar that body with the fascist brush in any meaningful sense. Furthermore, those wishing to find evidence of overtly fascist leanings in the pages of the official publications of the organisation will be sorely disappointed. While the *Empire Record*

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<sup>498</sup> *The Times*, 15 May 1919, 24 February 1922, 25 February 1925.

<sup>499</sup> Linehan, p. 155.

<sup>500</sup> Ruotsila, p. 88; Pugh, p. 63.

<sup>501</sup> *Empire Record*, January 1923, p. 24.

<sup>502</sup> Farr, p. 260; Linehan, pp. 130-1. The Loyalty League, founded in October 1922, was ‘quite frankly, modelled on Italian Fascist lines’. The League declared ‘We want the Fascisti in England. Can we not emulate them in our League? Surely the English men and women are as capable and brave as these splendid Italian patriots’ (quoted in Farr, *ibid.*).

<sup>503</sup> Linehan, pp. 126-7.

<sup>504</sup> N. Webster, *The Need for Fascism in Great Britain*, British Fascists, London, (1926); Gottlieb, *Feminine Fascism...*, p. 31.

<sup>505</sup> BEU, *The British Empire Union: Its Branches and what they are doing*, p. 3; *Empire Record*, December 1920, p. 4, June 1921, pp.101-2; July 1931, p. 118.

certainly expressed support for Italian Fascism, it was generally more guarded in its assessment than the *Morning Post* and the *Patriot*; and, significantly, it explicitly questioned the applicability of such a movement to British circumstances.

In May 1922 the BEU's Milan-based special correspondent reported that the Fascisti were very strong in the city, with 10,000 members, who were

working up a great revolution to turn out the Communists and their German-Jew leaders. It is a stand-up fight between the Loyalists and the Bolshevists here, and the Fascisti will win as they are a very powerful body.<sup>506</sup>

In July the correspondent stated that 'The great power in the land is in the hands of the Fascisti, and rightly so, as they saved Italy from the German Jew Communist[s] 18 months ago'. The Fascists are described as consisting mainly of 'loyal ex-servicemen', formed into an 'armed and equipped fighting force... [of] one and a half million men', augmented by the same number of reservists. Their 'Spiritual Chief', Mussolini, is described as a 'very remarkable man... [who is] worshipped by all the Fascisti'. The Fascists' ascendancy is welcomed on the grounds that 'The old love for our country will be cherished by them as traditional, and they are anti-Bolshevist and entirely against this shameless treaty with Soviet Russia just signed in Rome by their German-led Government'.<sup>507</sup>

Nearly a year later the *Empire Record* reproduced a speech made by Mussolini to delegates who had assembled in Rome for the Second Congress of the International

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<sup>506</sup> *Empire Record*, May 1922, p. 95.

<sup>507</sup> *Empire Record*, July 1922, p. 123.

Chamber of Commerce. Mussolini styled himself as a pro-business conservative who wished to return Italy 'to the full normality of her political and economic life'.<sup>508</sup> His statements explain, in part, why the British right were initially prone to regard Fascism as an ally in the fight against left-wing extremism, and the commensurate view on the left that 'Fascism is essentially a movement expressing the interests of industrial capitalists':<sup>509</sup>

It is my conviction that the State must renounce its economic functions...give full play to private enterprise and forgo any measure of State control or State paternalism.... I do not believe that that complex of forces which...may be called with the glorious name of capitalism, is about to end, as for a length of time it was thought it would by several thinkers of the social extremism.... [A]ll systems of associated economy which avoid free initiative and individual impulse, fail more or less piteously in a short lapse of time. But free initiative does not exclude understandings among groups, which are all the easier, the more loyal is the protection accorded to private interests.<sup>510</sup>

Mussolini's left critics often pointed to the 'demagogic device' whereby he made great play of his working-class origins and labour movement past when addressing workers.<sup>511</sup> There seems little doubt that Mussolini chose his words to suit his audience on this occasion too. Whether or not Mussolini was trying to be all things to all men, the BEU

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<sup>508</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1923, p. 101.

<sup>509</sup> L. W., *Fascism: Its History and Significance*, Plebs League, London (October 1924), p. 17.

<sup>510</sup> *Empire Record*, June 1923, p. 102.

<sup>511</sup> L. W., p. 5.



appear to have taken his pro-capitalist sentiments at face value, as there is no word of criticism accompanying its reporting of this particular speech.

Following another protracted silence on the subject, the *Empire Record* returned to the theme of fascism in March 1924, in a short piece 'giving a few details concerning this great counter-bolshevic [sic] force'. It describes the 'Fasci', rather romantically, as 'the little bands of men who set out to break the communist rule', pointing out that under Mussolini's generalship:

the Fascismo have become one of the most vital forces in Europe. At the beginning it was a grim fight, they were few and all bolshevic Italy was against them, but they were in the right and they knew it. One of the Fascisti customs is that when calling roll after a raid, should the name of one who has fallen in action be called, the entire 'squadra' answer 'Here'. Roll call over, the caller will salute his commanding officer and announce 'All present and accounted for'. It will take more than communists to destroy this spirit.

While the bravado of the Italian *squadristi* clearly appealed, it was felt necessary to stress that the Italian approach was not necessarily the most appropriate solution for Britain:

But to any who play with the idea of a picturesque body of blackshirts putting England's wrongs to right, I would point out that the Fascismo was essentially born of the need of the moment, when violence had to be met with violence.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> *Empire Record*, March 1924, p. 55.

The persistence of Fascist violence in Italy well beyond ‘the need of the moment’, in particular the ‘extremely shocking’ murder of Matteotti, was a source of some discomfort for the BEU, and tested its initial rose-tinted view of the new regime.<sup>513</sup>

The *Empire Record* did not devote a great deal of attention to the question of fascism in the 1920s. Despite the paucity of its coverage, however, the extracts above provide an outline of the trajectory of the BEU attitude to organised fascism. Italian Fascism was welcomed initially as a counter-Bolshevik force when it was felt that bourgeois hegemony was under threat; but regarded rather more coolly when it became apparent that the threat was diminished, and Fascism’s ‘Continental excesses’ became apparent. The BEU’s attitude to the small band of British ‘fascists’ may have been coloured by similar considerations; though this is difficult to ascertain as there was very little official comment on this matter. This might be taken as an indication that, much like the Conservative Party, the BEU studiously ignored such organisations, regarding them as a liability, or more likely as insignificant.<sup>514</sup>

Martin Pugh has suggested that the ‘frustration and anger’ evident among the British middle classes in the early post-war period, which manifested itself in the formation of organisations like the National Party and the Anti-Waste League, ‘could easily have become the seedbed for fascism’.<sup>515</sup> Although the main sources of press support for these bodies, the *Morning Post* and Lord Rothermere’s *Daily Mail* respectively, were to be consistent apologists for Mussolini and Italian Fascism, Pugh’s assertion is difficult to concretise, because the National Party had been dissolved and the

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<sup>513</sup> *Empire Record*, August 1924, p. 132.

<sup>514</sup> Benewick, p. 38; Baker, p. 20.

<sup>515</sup> Pugh, p. 76.

AWL was in terminal decline when Mussolini assumed power.<sup>516</sup> A much more fruitful avenue of investigation in this regard exists, however, in the form of the other significant right-wing organisation thrown up by the ferment of the Coalition years – the National Citizens' Union.

As with the BEU, prominent members of the NCU expressed support for Mussolini and Fascism; and some went on to join the British Fascists after 1923. Many of the NCU's leading 'fascists' were also members of the BEU, including Burn and Chadwick, Prebendary Gough, Prescott-Decie, and Colonel Lane.<sup>517</sup> Nesta Webster's views were also endorsed in the NCU press, and she often spoke at NCU meetings on a variety of anti-socialist topics.<sup>518</sup> So, too, did Mrs Hamilton More Nisbett, the Vice-President of the British Fascists' Scottish Women's Units.<sup>519</sup> A leading member of Richmond NCU, Lieutenant-Colonel Reginald Tyrer, was also a supporter of the BF in the locality, as well as being 'an outspoken and rather volatile Conservative'.<sup>520</sup>

Public expressions of sympathy with Italian Fascism are far more evident in the *New Voice* than in the *Empire Record*. Furthermore, it contains a number of articles and letters which stress the affinity between the NCU and Mussolini's movement, and proclaim fascism's applicability to British circumstances. In a December 1922 interview with Dr. C. Pellizzi, a representative of the Italian Fascisti, and London correspondent of its journal, *Popolo d'Italia*, the alleged similarities between the NCU and fascism are enthusiastically brought to the fore:

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<sup>516</sup> Pugh, pp. 41, 47.

<sup>517</sup> Linehan, p. 45.

<sup>518</sup> *New Voice*, August 1924, p. 12, September 1926, p. 5; *National Citizen*, March 1927, p. 6, p.15, April 1927, p. 2, May 1927, p. 3; Benewick, p. 41; M. Ruotsila, 'Mrs. Webster's religion: conspiracist extremism on the Christian far right', *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (May 2004), p. 12.

<sup>519</sup> *Scotsman*, 9 February 1924.

<sup>520</sup> Woodbridge, 'The National Citizens' Union in Richmond...', p. 88.

For many months past headquarters of the National Citizens' Union has been interested in the doings of the Fascisti for general reasons, and also because, owing to similarity of aims and policy, the NCU is often called the Fascisti of England.... A representative of THE NEW VOICE called on Dr. Pellizzi last week and heard some details regarding the Fascisti movement and its noble ideals, Dr. Pellizzi recognising many points in NCU policy which coincide with Fascismo.<sup>521</sup>

The remainder of the article repeats, with credulity and admiration, Pellizzi's eulogy to the new doctrine:

Depending on the best basic principles of national and personal desire as its starting point, it relies on the power of its intellectual forces for those principles to be carried out.... Fascismo regards itself as the expression of the true desire or need of the masses.... After the war, the movement became an organisation of ex-servicemen, and the intellectual middle classes joined it in great numbers. Its discipline is magnificent and its organisation a wonder.... The Fascist plan of Government...has every evidence of being a good model.

In the same issue there is another laudatory article, by Nora Brownrigg, entitled 'Fascisti: A Conservative Re-action against Bolshevism'. Brownrigg asks:

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<sup>521</sup> *New Voice*, December 1922, p. 4; C.f. C. Pellizzi, 'The Fascista Movement', *Journal of the British Institute of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May 1923), pp. 119-124.

Is it possible that a new chapter has opened in the history of the world? For the last few years the world in general has suffered from strikes, Socialist excesses, Bolshevism and anarchy.... In the last few months one country has succeeded in evolving order out of chaos, and with stern courage has really started 'to set its house in order'.... Fascismo has formed a public opinion which not only demands justice and practical reform, but sees to it that the aspirations are realised.<sup>522</sup>

Whilst acknowledging that some of the Fascisti 'have passed through a phase of socialism and communism in their search for a new order, the keynote of which should be Brotherhood', Brownrigg stresses that such people 'did not form the nucleus of Fascismo...[but]...joined the party later. It was the younger men and the educated classes who banded themselves together to put an end to the disorders of the Socialists and Bolsheviks which threatened to ruin the whole country'. This image of fascism as a predominantly middle-class defence force clearly held certain attractions for the NCU:

The movement began as a natural and legitimate reaction against the intolerable anarchy created by the Italian Bolsheviks during the feeble government of Nitti in 1919. The occupation of the factories which was allowed by the Giolitti government of 1920, sealed the fate of Bolshevism. It was then that the middle classes and their champions, the Fascisti, took their courage in both hands and awoke to the fact that it was up to them to retaliate and repress anarchy and restore order.

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<sup>522</sup> *New Voice*, December 1922, p. 8.

Brownrigg emphasises the support received by Mussolini from industrialists, the bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, police, soldiers, and civil servants. Essentially she presents fascism as *counter-revolutionary*, emanating from elements within the existing state apparatus, and from among the privileged and middle strata of society. Much faith is placed in Mussolini as a moderate, conservative statesman, who would bring order to the streets:

Anarchy had to be fought with its own weapons, but now that they have gained their end...Mussolini...is determined to uphold and enforce constitutional procedure and to abandon the doctrine of extra-legal organised force which has been in being up till now.... Our sympathies must go out to the new Government, with the hope that Mussolini will succeed in his...task.

Particular praise is directed by Brownrigg towards the virile young Italian men who had donned black shirts to extinguish the Bolshevist menace: 'It is the youth of Italy that has wrought this miracle, under the firm guidance of a man who knew how to organise them and use their patriotism and spirit of self-sacrifice for their country'.

This emphasis on the youthfulness of fascism became a recurring theme in NCU discourse. In Spring 1923, a future British Fascist supporter, John Baker White, *apologised* for his tender years prior to making a speech at a meeting of Canterbury NCU.<sup>523</sup> His apologies were in all likelihood brushed aside by his audience, for youth was a precious commodity in an organisation which appears to have had a surfeit of

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<sup>523</sup> *New Voice*, April 1923, p. 11.

middle-aged, as well as middle-class, members. In January 1923 'J. P.' from Hythe insisted in a letter to the *New Voice* that

More young blood is needed. The NCU would become much more powerful if it could enlist the bulk of middle class youth of both sexes. Our young men are playing too much. The extraordinary 'pull' of sport, while good up to a point, is keeping our young people...away from any part in the serious things of life today, which suits the 'Bolshie book' admirably. Probably ninety per cent of the Italian Fascisti are under thirty years of age.... Let us...enlist and encourage in our ranks the young men and young women of our land.<sup>524</sup>

The following month, in an unsigned piece on the 'Development of National Citizen's Union Interests: Some Suggestions for the Branches', it is asserted that:

The success of the Italian Fascisti is due almost entirely to youth, and the National Citizens' Union as a national body might become the Fascisti of England if the younger members were enrolled in large enough numbers. The NCU as Fascisti, while keeping in mind a similar ideal, would be without the faults and dangers of the Italian movement, and would avoid the harshness which has accompanied the growth of Mussolini's organisation.<sup>525</sup>

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<sup>524</sup> *New Voice*, January 1923, p. 13.

<sup>525</sup> *New Voice*, February 1923, p. 12.

In the same issue there is a letter from one A. Leonard Summers, who urges the NCU to develop as a fascist movement in a tone which adds credence to Pugh's suggestion of middle-class activism as a potential 'seedbed for fascism':

The power of the Middle Classes is far greater than appears to be realised.... 'If the middle classes would only form a strong combined union, no Government could stand against them'.... I suggest that *the NCU seeks the active co-operation of all Ratepayers' and Taxpayers' Associations, also the Chambers of Commerce throughout the kingdom.* Such a powerful combination could accomplish many useful things, but I would even go further and advocate what the NCU already forms the nucleus of – *the establishing of a British Fascismo!* Why not? Signor Mussolini has quickly and clearly shown the whole world how completely the Italian Fascist movement put down Communism, reduced expenditure, defeated bureaucracy, and relieved the taxation burden, besides dealing effectively with food profiteering and similar injustices.... Obviously the time has come when normality and stability of nations can only be regained by the *combined efforts of the people themselves....* To my mind *no nation more sorely needs the healthy movement than battered Britain.* I believe that if the NCU decided to organise a Fascisti, the proposal would be received with immense enthusiasm immediately, not only among members, but throughout the country, and that there would be a surprising rush to join the forces of what would rapidly become the greatest power for good England has ever seen! Now, Middle Classes, what about it?<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> *New Voice*, February 1923, p. 14 (emphases in original).



The editorial comment which accompanies the letter informs Mr. Summers that ‘the NCU is already known and referred to as the English Fascisti, and...the new campaign outlined for 1923 by the Grand Council...will emphasise this fact’. The promised emphasis did not in fact materialise, and excitement regarding the prospects of an ‘English Fascisti’ emerging from the ranks of the NCU soon died down.

By the Autumn of 1923 the organisation was at some pains to distance itself from its erstwhile brethren in Italy. Public concern regarding Mussolini’s dictatorial tendencies and the brutality of the movement’s black-shirted vanguard meant that more often than not the epithet ‘Fascisti’ was applied to the NCU pejoratively by its opponents. The following editorial in the *New Voice* shows a marked change of tone:

‘People think that [Italian Fascism] is rather like what our Citizens’ Union might accomplish if its very mild members armed themselves with revolvers and took their coats off’. In these terms, Lord Rothermere in...the *Sunday Pictorial*...refers to the NCU, possibly even intending his words to suggest a certain line of action. The fact is, however, that although Mussolini certainly broke the Communist movement in Italy, the Fascist activity was entirely a lawless undertaking, accompanied by much bloodshed and even murder. Its tyranny would never appeal to Englishmen for long, and rightly so, on the principle that two wrongs never made a right. Further, the time for violence or harsh action has not arrived and probably never will, because the more reasonable methods of education,

propaganda and debate will achieve the desired object in our country, and civil war or class murder will neither be tolerated nor necessary.<sup>527</sup>

The same viewpoint had already been aired, at an NCU rally in Brixton on 24 September 1923, by Gervais Rentoul, Conservative MP for Lowestoft. Rentoul, wished to ‘see the reign of force come to an end and to see the reign of law and peace prevail in public affairs. I am therefore equally opposed to Communists and the Fascisti’.<sup>528</sup>

The overriding picture, however, is one of ambiguity, with a number of leading members of the NCU publicly voicing their allegiance to fascism as the decade progressed. At the fifth annual conference of the organisation, held in London on 13 June 1924, Pretyman Newman stated that the new Labour government was the British equivalent of the Kerensky administration which had succumbed to Bolshevism in November 1917. Such a situation would resolve itself, he believed, in either bloody revolution on the Russian model, or in salvation for the middle classes as had occurred in Italy, due to the activities of Mussolini’s Fascists. He left his audience in little doubt which outcome he preferred:

I know there is a Fascist movement in England. I am a Fascist myself. I see some of you here are Fascists. I am really sorry you came into existence, because you have stolen part of our objects. It was *our* movement. Well, we can now work with you and you with us to keep...essential public services going, and if it comes to a question of anything like real direct action and those beginnings of

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<sup>527</sup> *New Voice*, October 1923, p. 3.

<sup>528</sup> *New Voice*, November 1923, p. 16.

revolution, we, the National Citizens' Union, and you, the Fascisti, will stand together as one undivided body.<sup>529</sup>

A rather differently worded report of the same speech in the *Manchester Guardian*, while conveying the same general message, makes clear, however, that Pretymen Newman was not a card-carrying member of the BF:

I know there is a Fascist movement in England. I am a Fascist myself. I have not attended a Fascist meeting, and have not paid a subscription. I don't know very much about it. I was asked to join by an old colleague of mine in Parliament. Some of you are Fascists. I am sorry that it came into existence. We ought to be doing the work that you are doing. Simply because we have been slack you have come into being. If direct action is started the National Citizens' Union and the Fascists will stand together as one undivided body to nip any revolution in the bud.<sup>530</sup>

At the NCU Grand Council meeting of 28 November 1924 a resolution from the Broadstone (Dorset) branch was passed which 'fully approves of closer co-operation between the NCU, BEU, British Fascisti and other kindred organisations'.<sup>531</sup>

This confusion came to a head in 1925-6 and centred on the role organised 'fascists' should play in the voluntary effort to maintain essential services in the event of a general strike. In November 1925 Dame Louisa Lumsden addressed an Edinburgh

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<sup>529</sup> *New Voice*, July 1924, p. 10.

<sup>530</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 14 June 1924.

<sup>531</sup> *New Voice*, December 1924, p. 11.

lodge of the Unionist Workers' League, an official Conservative Party body, on the subject 'Is Fascism Desirable?' Although expressing the view that 'Fascism had saved Italy from ruin' in 'conditions...very similar to those we have in this country at the present moment', she felt that fascism, 'owing to the difference between British and Italian mentality...would never be tolerated in this country'. Instead, she endorsed the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS) and the NCU, which, 'being non-party and non-political, were to be preferred in this country to combat any attempted hold-up of the community'.<sup>532</sup> Lumsden was possibly unaware that the British Fascists were in fact working alongside the NCU and BEU in the OMS. In April 1926, following parliamentary criticism of the OMS and its links with 'fascist' groups, Joynson-Hicks, the Conservative Home Secretary, and a prominent member of both the NCU and BEU, threatened to resign his positions in those organisations if they did not back his call for the 'fascists' in the OMS to change their name, reject paramilitarism and endorse parliamentary democracy.<sup>533</sup> The OMS and its affiliates backed Joynson-Hicks, precipitating a major split in the BF, resulting in the formation of the British Loyalists which accepted the conditions.<sup>534</sup> In spite of such public disavowals of fascism, however, a number of leading NCU members persisted in calling themselves fascists. Following the collapse of the General Strike a *New Voice* editorial describing the work of NCU strike volunteers exclaimed: 'England was said to have needed a Mussolini! England found Mussolinis by the thousand!'<sup>535</sup> In the same month as the OMS controversy the

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<sup>532</sup> *Scotsman*, 4 November 1925.

<sup>533</sup> Maguire, "The Fascists...are...to be depended upon...", pp. 7-8.

<sup>534</sup> Farr, *The Development and Impact...*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>535</sup> *New Voice*, June 1926, p. 3

Chairwoman of Stratford-upon-Avon branch of the NCU, Mrs Eleanor Melville, proudly described herself as ‘A Fascist and a Conservative’.<sup>536</sup>

In 1927 Melville became a Vice-President of the NCU and sat on its Executive Committee. Joining her in these roles was Commander Oliver Locker-Lampson, Conservative MP for Handsworth.<sup>537</sup> Locker-Lampson is remembered by historians as an employer of fascist stewards at rallies of his ‘Clear Out the Reds’ campaign, which was praised fulsomely by the NCU, though regarded with some disdain by the BEU. Locker-Lampson personally requested ‘some six hundred fascist stewards’ for a rally at the Albert Hall in July 1926; and in October ‘1,500 fascists’ attended a similar event, chaired by the NCU president, Lord Askwith, at which they ‘carried Union Jacks, formed a guard of honour, conducted Locker-Lampson and the other speakers down the gangway, and ejected anyone who disturbed the meeting’.<sup>538</sup> Less well known is the fact that Locker-Lampson later attempted to turn Clear Out the Reds into a personal vehicle for his own demagogic style of anti-communist propaganda. This movement, which operated under a variety of names, including ‘Hands off Our Empire’, the ‘Sentinels of Empire’, the ‘League of Loyalists’, and the ‘Blueshirts’, employed fascist-style symbolism and ritual to a far greater extent than others on the anti-socialist right. The Sentinels wore blue shirts and employed a host of other blue paraphernalia; they also had their own anthem, entitled *March On!* whose lyrics were personally composed by Locker-Lampson.<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> T. Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare*, Routledge, London (1992), pp. 48-9.

<sup>537</sup> *National Citizen*, May, 1927, p. 5; *The Times*, 14 July 1927.

<sup>538</sup> Pugh, p. 61; Farr, pp. 64-5.

<sup>539</sup> ‘Blue Shirts and Blood’, *Time Magazine*, 6 July 1931; W. R. Collins, *March On! Song of the Loyalist League: Sentinels of Empire*, musical score, London (1930).

Despite, or perhaps because of, their leader earning the nickname ‘Britain’s Hitler’, the Sentinels vanished rather abruptly into obscurity in 1932.<sup>540</sup>

While the above investigation into the attitudes of the BEU and NCU provides useful evidence showing that fascism appealed to the British anti-socialist right and was occasionally considered worth emulating, it is less helpful when employed for definitional purposes. Confusion regarding the precise nature of such organisations forms a strand of a much wider debate on the nature of fascism itself. In recent decades this field has been dominated by scholars striving to distil the essence of fascism – the ‘fascist minimum’ – to provide an abstract but heuristically useful definition of ‘generic fascism’. This approach, which is most forcefully articulated in the work of Roger Griffin, has been employed to differentiate ‘genuine’ fascist organisations from other right-wing, militarist and reactionary bodies. In *The Nature of Fascism* Griffin contends that previous efforts at understanding fascism have widened its definition too far, causing scholars to lose sight of fascism’s core ideological values.<sup>541</sup> To counter this he posits fascism as an abstraction embodying fascism’s ideological minimum.<sup>542</sup> Griffin’s resulting ‘new ideal type of generic fascism’, in its most concise form, ‘...is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism.’<sup>543</sup> Important characteristics of fascism that flow from this ideal type are its revolutionary nature, anti-Marxism, anti-capitalism, and anti-conservatism. Griffin’s fascism is thus far removed from liberal- and Marxist-inspired perceptions of fascism as reactionary, conservative and counter-revolutionary. Griffin’s definitional model may be

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<sup>540</sup> A. Del Boca and M. Giovana, *Fascism Today: A World Survey*, Heinemann, London (1970), p. 14.

<sup>541</sup> R.Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, Routledge, London (1996), chapter 1.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 8-12.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27.

employed in order to show that the organisations of the British anti-socialist right, and indeed much of the ‘first wave’ of British ‘fascism’, notably the BF, possessed few characteristics which could reasonably justify labelling them ‘fascist’.

Another author writing within the fascist minimum framework is Thomas Linehan. He dismisses the fascist credentials of organisations like the BEU and the NCU, stating that ‘It is clear on closer examination that the political and ideological profile of the post-war anti-labour groups did not contain an appropriate number of generic fascist characteristics’.<sup>544</sup> Employing the empirical evidence of these bodies’ attitudes to fascism detailed above, alongside other aspects of their outlook and activity laid down in the accompanying chapters, it is possible to suggest qualifications to some of Linehan’s points whilst concurring with his general thesis.

Linehan rightly points out that there was ‘a noticeable absence of a leadership cult within these anti-labour formations’.<sup>545</sup> The founder of the BEU, Sir George Makgill, seems to have deliberately shunned the limelight; while the organisation’s Secretary, Reginald Wilson, though clearly an energetic editor and organiser, does not come across as either charismatic or demagogic. Likewise, Lord Askwith, an expert in industrial relations and former government negotiator, often sought to add a conciliatory note to MCU/NCU proceedings. Askwith’s caution was sometimes employed to restrain ‘fascist’ hotheads like Pretyman Newman and Prebendary Gough; but no leadership cult ever threatened to develop around these figures either. The formal figureheads of the British anti-socialist right were often elderly aristocrats, military men, and veteran Conservative

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<sup>544</sup> Linehan, *British Fascism...*, p. 55.

<sup>545</sup> Linehan, p.55.

MPs who had been elevated to the House of Lords at the end of their political careers, like Lord Danesfort.

Linehan states that among the anti-socialist right there is ‘simply no evidence of a desire to overthrow the existing order and replace it with a new type of state based on the myth of a revitalised national community’.<sup>546</sup> The BEU and NCU saw their role primarily as *defending* the existing order and preventing its overthrow. However, there was a tendency on the right at times to regard liberalism, socialism and cosmopolitanism as forces which had *usurped* power in Britain, both by bribery and manipulation of the uneducated new electorate, and through blatant corruption. As Lloyd George’s Coalition fell apart in 1921-2 there was a sense that ‘old’ forms of politics were becoming obsolete; that ‘the people’, or more often ‘the public’ – by which was often meant middle-class rate- and tax-payers – should have a more direct say in the governance of the nation, particularly regarding public expenditure. There was a *rhetorical insurgency* directed against the government at this time led by politicians and press barons whose views coincided with those of the anti-socialist right on these questions. A. Leonard Summers’ notion, alluded to earlier, that ‘normality’ and ‘stability’ could only be ‘regained by the combined efforts of the people themselves’, shows how Mussolini’s success in Italy seemed to concretise a strategy for the achievement of these middle-class aspirations. Despite clear differences between Italian and British conditions in the early 1920s, there were enough similarities for the anti-socialist right to at least speculate on the fortunes of an ‘English Fascisti’, growing from the ranks of the NCU and the wider cohorts of the disillusioned Conservative right – had the Coalition managed to survive beyond 1922. That it did not is, of course, testimony to the dominant allegiance of the British anti-

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<sup>546</sup> Linehan, p. 55.



socialist right at the time, which was to the Conservative Party and ‘Constitutional’ politics. Organisations like the BEU and the NCU were able to articulate and channel middle-class fears and aspirations which might under different circumstances – defeat in war, an intractable period of crisis, and a revolutionary, Marxist-led labour movement – have necessitated a more thoroughbred fascism than the various ‘ugly ducklings’ which in fact hatched out.

On the question of paramilitarism, Linehan states that there is no indication that the anti-socialist right ‘were prepared to embrace a culture of political violence’.<sup>547</sup> He takes issue with Hope’s suggestion that the right entertained thoughts of a paramilitary solution to Britain’s post-war ills, creating a ‘sort of *squadristi* in waiting’. Yet, throughout the 1920s, and during earlier struggles, the right was willing to at least countenance the use of paramilitary force against its enemies. Benewick points to a tradition of paramilitarism on the right, symbolised by the preparations for civil war made by Ulster Unionists and their Conservative allies in 1912.<sup>548</sup> The anti-socialist right were the heirs of that tradition. Appealing against a conviction for sedition in 1921, the communist-sympathising MP, Colonel Malone, pointed out that during the Ulster crisis a number of Unionist MPs later associated with the NCU had made speeches condoning illegal acts of violence. Pretyman Newman had said ‘To my mind, any man would be justified in shooting Mr Asquith in the streets of London’; while A. M. Samuel had said that ‘When the first shot of civil war is fired in Ulster, as sure as we stand here one of the Cabinet Ministers will be hanged on a lamp-post in Downing Street’.<sup>549</sup> Such figures provide a direct link between those prepared to take up arms against Home Rule and the

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<sup>547</sup> Linehan, p. 55.

<sup>548</sup> Benewick, pp. 22-6.

<sup>549</sup> *Scotsman*, 18 January 1921.

anti-communists of the 1920s. During the Great War the BEU organised gangs of thugs to attack supposed enemy aliens and pacifist meetings on many occasions. During the partition of Ireland the BEU was involved in the violent expulsion of Catholic and socialist workers from Belfast's shipyards. It was by its own admission associated at this time with the Ulster Protestant Association, a body which evolved rapidly into a sectarian murder gang.

Violence was hinted at whenever 'Constitutional Government' seemed in peril, notably after the accession to office of the first Labour government in early 1924. Pugh, detecting a 'militarist element' in the calculations of the anti-socialist right at this time, describes how the Duke of Northumberland felt the best outcome would be 'a civil war from which the patriots would emerge victorious'.<sup>550</sup> In this atmosphere, at a meeting organised by the NCU to discuss the new situation, Lady Askwith described the Labour government as an 'attempted despotism of a small minority', while Sir Frederick Banbury moved a resolution 'affirming that the overwhelming majority of the electors of this country were opposed to being governed by the Socialist minority in the new Parliament'. Prebendary Gough dismissed 'this absurd cant of fair play' as applied to the Labour Party. To cries of 'Shoot him' from the audience, Banbury referred to a speech by the left-wing Labour MP, George Lansbury, in which he had allegedly stated that Charles I had been beheaded for standing up against the common people. Banbury claimed Lansbury's speech was meant as a threat to the King and doubted a Labour government would respect the Constitution. Noting that 'the Long Parliament was dissolved by Cromwell with the aid of the Coldstream Guards', Banbury stated, to loud cheers, that 'I should have great pleasure in leading the Coldstream Guards into the House of Commons

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<sup>550</sup> Pugh, p. 86.

if Mr MacDonald attempted anything of that sort'.<sup>551</sup> As late as 1927 a letter to the *New Voice* advocated 'the restoration of the franchise to a property-owning and rate-paying basis', and urged 'the middle-class man to learn the use of the RIFLE and BAYONET as his means of reform in place of his *useless minority vote*'; though the editor was forced to point out that many readers might find such views 'reactionary'.<sup>552</sup>

Of course, much of the real rather than threatened violence of the patriotic right occurred at the more mundane level of physical confrontation with the left – using fists and coshes rather than firearms. The Edmonton branch of the BEU grew out of the pitched battles to hoist the Union Jack rather than the red flag above Edmonton Town Hall.<sup>553</sup> On many occasions, however, such violence grew out of the right's determination to *defend* its platform from left-wing attacks.<sup>554</sup> While the cry of 'self-defence' invariably accompanied the violence of Mussolini's *squadristi*, the extent of such conflict in Britain never reached the intensity shown on the Continent and remained secondary to peaceful methods of political struggle. Furthermore, there had been a long tradition of ritualised mob violence in British politics, particularly during election campaigns. The militant actions of the BEU may be better understood as more representative of this older political tradition than symptomatic of fascist tendencies. While there was a continual threat of violence underlying the right's anti-socialism, therefore, Linehan is probably right to suggest that this did not amount to a 'culture of violence', or an *ideological* commitment to political violence; at least not to the extent necessary to satisfy definitions of generic fascism. In most instances, the violence – threatened and real – of the British right was

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<sup>551</sup> *New Voice*, February 1924, P. 4.

<sup>552</sup> *New Voice*, February 1927, p. 9.

<sup>553</sup> Springhall, 'Lord Meath, Youth, and Empire', p. 110; *Empire Record*, May 1921, p. 85.

<sup>554</sup> *Empire Record*, November 1921, pp. 173-4, December 1921, p. 9.

aimed at *defending* 'the Constitution'. Even if Britain's post-war crisis had been more acute, necessitating use of armed force against the left or insurgent workers, there is little concrete evidence to suggest that the right would have stepped beyond offering auxiliary support to the existing coercive apparatus of the state.

Linehan stresses that there was no 'repository of "palingenetic political myth", the regenerative urge at the heart of authentic fascist doctrine, within this early post-war anti-labour discourse'.<sup>555</sup> It is an inescapable fact, however, that Britain's status as a nation at the end of the First World War was far removed from that of Italy or Germany, where fascist revolutions succeeded subsequently. This understanding has underpinned most explanations of the failure of British fascism in the inter-war period.<sup>556</sup> As Martin Durham has pointed out, 'Ultimately, Germany's defeat and the sheer size of the British Empire precluded the nationalist resentment so crucial to the rise of fascism elsewhere'.<sup>557</sup> But, while there were no British 'November Traitors', Durham points out that the possibilities for the extreme right were not wholly unpromising, due in part to the fact that '[t]he rise of insurgent nationalism within the Empire led to fears that the nation's pre-eminent role in the world was in danger, while at home...industrial unrest...polarised political opinion'.<sup>558</sup> 'Fascism' in its British context thus centred on the *defence* of the Empire from those alien forces allegedly at work trying to undermine Britain's pre-eminence at home and abroad. Paramount among these forces was Bolshevism, which was widely believed to be behind both domestic industrial unrest and

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<sup>555</sup> Linehan, p. 55.

<sup>556</sup> See, for example, J. Stevenson, 'Conservatism and the failure of fascism in interwar Britain', in M. Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Unwin Hyman, London (1990), p. 264.

<sup>557</sup> M. Durham, 'Britain', in K. Passmore (ed.), *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe 1919-45*, Manchester University Press, Manchester (2003), p. 215.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

nationalist insurgency. Britain's ostensible position as the world's premier imperial power in the 1920s not only inhibited the success of genuine fascism, but also *fundamentally conditioned* the organisational and ideological forms which the movement took there. Instead of regarding fascist revolution as a necessary step along the road to national rebirth in the 1920s, the vast majority of British patriots regarded the *existing* institutions of the state, as long as they were controlled by the right people, as the best guarantors of *perpetuating* national greatness and safeguarding it from its enemies and the baleful fate of previous empires.<sup>559</sup>

The above discussion suggests that the affinity with fascism of organisations like the BEU and the NCU should not be dismissed out of hand. Although they displayed an enduring attachment to capitalism and bourgeois democratic forms of governance which tends to rule them out as 'generic fascists', other elements of their ideological make up, notably their extreme anti-communism and ultra-nationalism place them within the general milieu of the authoritarian right, of which genuine fascism is a component. Arguably, the appeal of the ultra-nationalist ideology of the pro-Conservative anti-socialist right was a factor undermining the emergence of a genuine fascist movement in 1920s Britain. Pugh, for instance, has questioned the 'traditional assumption' that British fascism failed because the Conservative Party rejected its ideas, pointing out that 'it is just as plausible to argue that it failed because Conservatism *was* susceptible to pressure from the extreme right'.<sup>560</sup> That pressure was more successfully exerted by the politicians and businessmen of the BEU and the NCU than through the theatrical stunts of the British Fascists and the National Fascisti. In the 1920s the anti-socialist right encouraged

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<sup>559</sup> See, for example, the dire warnings contained in the BEU's appeal in support of its anti-Bolshevist campaign of 1920 (*The Times* 24 June 1920).

<sup>560</sup> Pugh, p. 77.

ultra-nationalist and anti-communist ideas in the Conservative Party. Although this may have contributed to what Benewick describes as the creation of ‘a climate of opinion receptive to fascist ideas’, it is more appropriate to regard the Conservative Party as a ‘more respectable and responsible outlet...’ for the fanatical patriotism and anti-Bolshevism which drove the phenomenon of fascism on the Continent. The ‘presence of a solid, reliable party of the established order was an important prerequisite in preventing the fragmentation and polarisation of middle-class voters’; it was a major factor undermining the successful development of ‘genuine’ revolutionary fascism in Britain in the 1920s.<sup>561</sup> Although traditional parties of the right on the Continent also attempted to articulate and control such prejudices and aspirations, in some cases they lost ground to genuine fascism, due to the intractable nature of their respective socio-political crises, which fuelled the militancy of their often Marxist-led workers’ movements. These were precisely the factors lacking in the British context, allowing the pre-existing organisations of the anti-socialist right such as the BEU and NCU to channel potentially ‘fascist’ energies and ambitions into mainstream forms of organisation and agitation.

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<sup>561</sup> Stevenson, p. 268.

## Conclusion.

The British Empire Union and the National Citizens' Union were among the leading anti-socialist organisations in Britain during the inter-war period. On a number of occasions between 1917 and 1927 they were able to push anti-socialist themes to the front of mainstream politics. The above discussion indicates that both organisations were more prominent and influential than the existing historiography of the British right suggests. Webber tends to dismiss the post-war anti-Bolshevist organisations as obscure and inept,<sup>562</sup> while Cowling describes their supporters as the 'lunatic fringe' of Conservative politics.<sup>563</sup> Such interpretations, taken at face value, can be misleading.

The BEU and NCU were relatively influential within Conservative Party circles, particularly among backbench MPs and local activists. They developed mass memberships during the post-war period which would put most British fringe groups of the twentieth century to shame. They played an important role in the events which culminated in the demise of the Lloyd George Coalition government. The Middle Classes Union, in particular, was prominent in the anti-waste agitation which helped to derail 'reconstruction' and encourage 'retrenchment'. Both organisations had a part in the development of anti-socialist alliances and pacts at local and national levels which contributed to Conservative electoral hegemony during the 1920s and beyond. Following the landslide Conservative general election victory of October 1924, which owed much to the wholesale employment of the type of violently anti-socialist propaganda the two organisations specialised in, Stanley Baldwin appointed a number of figures associated

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<sup>562</sup> Webber, 'Intolerance and Discretion...', pp. 162-3.

<sup>563</sup> Cowling, p. 90.

with the anti-socialist right to government positions.<sup>564</sup> While it is possible – as in the case of Sir Winston Churchill’s appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer – that Baldwin was strapping potential trouble-makers in the straightjacket of collective ministerial responsibility, rather than endorsing their views, it necessarily follows that some concern must have existed that such figures possessed a support base within the party which could not simply be ignored.

In the field of industrial relations, the MCU/NCU was the best-known and best-organised of the various strike-breaking bodies which emerged to tackle the problem of ‘direct action’ at the time; while the BEU was deeply involved in the project to instil pro-capitalist doctrine in working-class minds. Although Baldwin certainly personified the novel double-edged strategy of dialogue and conciliation backed up by firmness and resolution, characteristic of Conservative dealings with the labour movement at this time, his stance did not represent any fundamental break with the position expressed contemporaneously by the organisations of the anti-socialist right. Indeed, ‘Industrial Peace’ had been a slogan of the BEU since at least 1920. Although BEU and NCU members expressed a level of concern at Baldwin’s alleged softness towards the unions, particularly following his opposition to the Macquisten anti-union Bill in March 1925, and his alleged climb-down on ‘Red Friday’ four months later, the government’s subsequent preparation for and defeat of the General Strike was largely interpreted in terms of the Prime Minister coming around to the point of view of the anti-socialist right, with what seemed spectacularly successful consequences.

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<sup>564</sup> These included Lord Curzon (BEU), William Joynson-Hicks (BEU/NCU), Leopold Amery (BEU), Ronald McNeill (BEU), A. M. Samuel (NCU), Godfrey Locker-Lampson (NCU), Kingsley Wood (NCU), Lord Winterton (BEU), Robert Burton Chadwick (BEU/NCU/British Fascists), Wilfrid Ashley (ASU), and William Mitchell-Thomson (ASU) (*The Times*, 13 November 1924).



It is important not to exaggerate the level of success or influence enjoyed by the BEU and NCU, however. The claims of the organisations regarding their impact on elections and industrial disputes should not be taken at face value. There was disappointment at the failure to gain Cabinet support for legislative attacks on socialism over discrete issues like the 'Red' Sunday schools. While the Conservative Party machine happily included the right's brand of rabid anti-socialism in its general propaganda output, the parliamentary leadership – which occupied government office during the bulk of the period under discussion – was primarily inclined to utilise communism as a bogey during elections and at times of crisis. Calls by the right to ban the Communist Party of Great Britain and to outlaw the activities of associated bodies like the Communist Sunday Schools, the Minority Movement, and the National Unemployed Workers Movement, despite receiving widespread support among Conservative Party activists and backbench MPs, generally failed to move the government into decisive action. This changed somewhat in the run up to the General Strike of 1926; and particularly during its immediate aftermath, as the government appeared to give way to the right's calls for retribution against those who had allegedly plotted and financed a revolutionary takeover using the coal dispute as a pretext. This was, however, a pyrrhic victory for the right's propaganda and lobbying; and a false dawn for independent right-wing activism. The government's ability to move against the Communist left with impunity resulted as much from the acute weakness of the CPGB and its sympathisers after the strike as from the pressure of the anti-socialist right. The Conservative Party machine had assimilated anti-socialism so effectively that it undermined the ability of the anti-socialist right to attract funds and supporters on the back of fears of a movement clearly in a period of decline.

This point is made by Webber, who goes on to note that '[f]or most of those who disliked socialism there was simply no need to be more anti-socialist than the Conservative Party already was'.<sup>565</sup>

The anti-socialist activism which characterised the mid-1920s, though still important to the make up of the BEU and NCU, began to lose its pre-eminence after 1927; and other long-standing right-wing causes such as tariff reform came to the fore. This was particularly true after the debacle of the general election of 1929, when the perceived failure of negative anti-socialism – symbolised by the slogan 'Safety First' – intensified calls for 'positive' Conservative policies. Ultimately, Conservative willingness to exploit anti-socialism as part of its electoral and industrial strategy in the mid-1920s, combined with the collapse of any credible revolutionary socialist challenge after 1926, undermined the fortunes of the anti-socialist right. The subsequent decline of the NCU in the 1930s, the slow transformation of the BEU into a more passive imperial education and propaganda role by the 1940s and 50s, and the emergence of the Economic League as the primary organisation of British anti-subversive activism in the twentieth century can all be said to stem from this process.

Many of the leading right-wing figures associated with Cowling's 'lunatic fringe', including Henry Page Croft, John Gretton, and the Duke of Northumberland, backed Baldwin publicly on most matters throughout the 1920s, as did the BEU and NCU; although they reserved the right to press for a more 'muscular' Conservatism on a range of issues, including India, tariff reform and trade union law. This right-wing support for Baldwin's alleged 'centrist, liberal, conciliatory brand of politics',<sup>566</sup> has led to a level of

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<sup>565</sup> Webber, 'Intolerance and Discretion...', pp. 164-70.

<sup>566</sup> M. Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics 1867-1939*, Blackwell, Oxford (1982), p.279.

perplexity among some historians. Baldwin's biographer, Philip Williamson, for instance, expresses surprise that Northumberland was not more critical of Baldwin's leadership after 1922;<sup>567</sup> while David Thackeray, echoing the view of Barbara Farr,<sup>568</sup> suggests that the trajectory of Henry Page Croft in the 1920s was symptomatic of a process of moderation affecting some on the right.<sup>569</sup> Thackeray describes Croft's move away from the 'radical' experiment of the National Party, which espoused 'patriot violence' during the industrial strife of 1919; portraying him as a 'relatively quiescent' figure after 1922, committed to the parliamentary manoeuvring of the Empire Industries Association, and the work of the Primrose League, 'a group associated more with tea-dances than violent street politics'. Such an interpretation is misleading in a number of important respects. Firstly, figures like Northumberland and Croft, both of whom were members of the BEU, cannot be said to have moderated their opinions to any significant degree during this period, particularly as regards their attitude to socialism.<sup>570</sup> Secondly, it is a mistake to regard organisations like the Empire Industries Association and the Primrose League as quintessentially moderate Conservative bodies.<sup>571</sup> Thackeray himself points to a more coherent explanation of this seeming inconsistency when he notes that this period witnessed 'a significant overlap between moderate conservative and radical right identities'. He argues that this linkage only began to break down in the context of a

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<sup>567</sup> P. Williamson, 'Percy, Alan Ian, eighth duke of Northumberland (1880-1930)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2004); online edition (2006). Accessed at <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/35472> on 23 July 2007.

<sup>568</sup> Farr, *The Development and Impact...* pp. 63-70.

<sup>569</sup> D. Thackeray, review of A. Sykes, *The Radical Right in Britain: Social Imperialism to the BNP* (Reviews in History No. 592), accessed at <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/thackeray.html> on 11 January 2008.

<sup>570</sup> M. Ruotsila, 'The Antisemitism of the Eighth Duke of Northumberland's the *Patriot*, 1922-1930', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2004)

<sup>571</sup> L. L. Witherell, 'Sir Henry Page Croft and Conservative Backbench Campaigns for Empire, 1903-1932', *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (October 2006); M. Hendley, 'Anti-Alienism and the Primrose League...'

polarisation between fascism and conservatism in the 1930s. This thesis has explored this period of 'significant overlap' between 'radicalism' and 'moderation' which appears to have existed in 1920s Conservatism. This combination of allegedly contradictory political outlooks enabled the Conservative Party to dominate anti-socialist politics in Britain: its 'moderation' making it attractive to former Liberals concerned at the rise of the Labour Party and increased industrial militancy, its 'radicalism' simultaneously undercutting any serious challenge from fascism. The pressure groups of the anti-socialist right played an important role in this process. Although they wished to associate themselves with Mussolini's triumph over socialism, they were fundamentally Conservative in their outlook and their actions. The investigation of the relationship between the British anti-socialist right and fascism in chapter four, added to the detailed description of the propaganda and activity of the British Empire Union and National Citizens Union in the preceding chapters, provides a substantial body of evidence to support this thesis.

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