

# The real John Maclean 2

John Maclean was one of the greatest revolutionaries which the British labour movement has ever produced. Yet at the end of his life he refused to join — and indeed denounced — the early Communist Party, then inspired by Lenin, not Stalin. His stance has been taken by some as evidence for the idea that outside intervention from Moscow ruined a British revolutionary movement which would have developed better left on its own, by others as authority for the project of developing a separate Scottish revolutionary movement. Bob Pitt argues against such views.

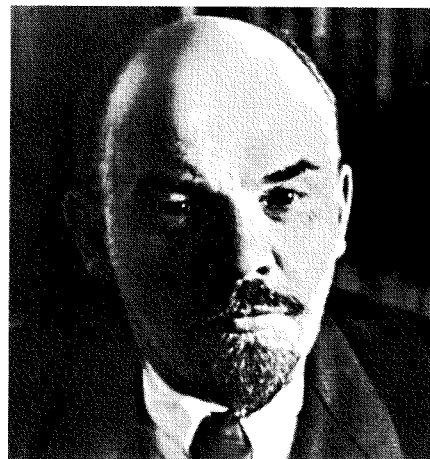
Part one of this article, covering Maclean's politics from 1918 to late 1920, appeared in *WL24*; this concluding section deals with the last three years of Maclean's life, in which he joined and then left the "De Leonite" Socialist Labour Party (SLP), and then set up his own tiny "Scottish Workers" Republican Party."

IT WAS in November 1920 that Maclean for the first time criticised Moscow's intervention in the revolutionary movement in Britain. Given the fact that Gallacher and the Bolsheviks were in agreement on the disputed issues of a single British Communist Party and the political honesty of the CPGB leadership, Maclean could do little else. "I for one", he wrote, "will not follow a policy dictated by Lenin until Lenin knows the situation more clearly". And he asserted: "The less Russians interfere in the internal affairs of other countries at this juncture the better for the cause of Revolution in those countries". Even at this point, though, there is no basis for Graham Bain's assertion that

Maclean "saw only disaster in foreign interference". The key phrase was "at this juncture". Maclean's view was that, due to the isolation of the Russian workers' republic, the Moscow-based Comintern leaders' attempts to direct the British revolutionary movement were undermined by their lack of accurate information concerning the actual political situation in Britain. He was far from opposing in principle the right of the International to intervene in political developments in other countries.

Indeed, the pamphlet *Moscow's Reply to the ILP*, with its heavy emphasis on the importance of a centralised revolutionary International, had been acclaimed by Maclean as a work which would have an even greater political impact than the Communist Manifesto. And his call for a Scottish Communist Party was addressed to those revolutionaries who supported the Comintern's 21 conditions for membership, adopted at the Second Congress, which were equally uncompromising in insisting on a centralised international leadership. In the aftermath of the Second International's capitulation in August 1914, when the overwhelming majority of its constituent sections refused to implement the agreed anti-war policy and rallied to the support of their own bourgeoisies, it is hardly surprising that Maclean should support the Bolshevik conception of international organisation. The idea that his writings provide any support for Kendall's view that "the attempt to build the Communist International as a single world party... was doomed to failure from the start" is frankly ludicrous.

Maclean might have been expected to jump at the chance to put his case for a Scottish section of the Comintern to the International's leadership in Moscow. He had failed to attend the Second Congress in July, after making it an issue of principle to demand that the Home Office grant him a passport — a demand which was not unexpectedly refused. On returning from Russia, to which he himself had travelled illegally, Gallacher tried to convince Maclean that he should go and discuss with the Comintern leaders. Gallacher states that he had told Lenin "about the difficulty with John Maclean, of John's obsession with spies and his utter lack of faith in all who had participated in the unity negotiations, and in



**Maclean rejected the Lenin-inspired British Communist Party**

particular his 'exposure' of Theodore Rothstein as a representative of the Bolsheviks in London under the belief that he was an agent of the British Government. This was unfortunate, said Lenin, but I must persuade Maclean to visit Moscow". Maclean was at first quite agreeable to this, but then changed his mind and responded angrily to Gallacher's attempts at persuasion, accusing Gallacher of trying to remove him from the political scene in Glasgow. Gallacher blamed James Clunie, at that time a leading member of the SLP, for encouraging Maclean's paranoia, and wrote a letter to the SLP executive complaining about Clunie's behaviour, in the course of which he told them that Maclean was suffering from 'hallucinations'. Gallacher proposed that both he and Maclean should meet with the SLP leadership to try and resolve the matter. Instead his letter was passed on to Maclean himself, with predictable consequences for the already fraught relationship between Maclean and Gallacher.

All this took place in the run-up to Maclean's conference to launch a Scottish Communist Party, which was held at the SLP's Glasgow headquarters on 25 December 1920. The events that occurred there are well-documented, both in Gallacher's and McShane's memoirs and in detailed contemporary reports published by the *Scottish Daily Record* and *Sunday Mail*, who evidently had a reporter planted in the audience. Maclean denounced Gallacher as "no better than a government agent" and at one point the confrontation between the two men looked as if it might end in blows. The conference ended, not with the formation of an independent Scots revolutionary party, but with Maclean appealing to the audience to join the SLP. The fact that Maclean should become a member of this party, which explicitly condemned the idea of "a Scottish Communist Party for 'pure' Scotsmen", itself puts into perspective the role which Maclean's

## John Maclean and the CPGB

Bob Pitt's full account of Maclean's political evolution between 1918 and 1921. This pamphlet also reprints contemporary material bearing on these events, including Maclean's *Open Letter to Lenin* of 1921.

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new-found nationalism played in his opposition to the CPGB. "Neither Maclean nor the SLP rejected their respective positions", Ripley and McHugh point out, "and the former occasionally argued his case in the columns of *The Socialist*. It was simply not of sufficient importance to inhibit their cooperation..."

If the SLP rejected Maclean's position on the Scottish national question they were, as Gallacher had alleged in the disputed letter, apparently happy to encourage him in his delusions about his political opponents. Immediately after the December conference, an article in the SLP's paper *The Socialist* commented that if Gallacher was not ashamed of his actions there he was "only worthy of being what some believe him to be". This slur, Gallacher replied angrily in *The Worker*, was "merely a reference to the fact that the latest recruit to the ranks of the SLP has publicly accused me of being a Government Agent". If they really believed Maclean's accusation against him, Gallacher told the SLP, then they should come right out and say so. "Only remember this", he advised, "if you accept the statement of the 'latest recruit', you've got to accuse every active man in the movement of being in the same position. When you make up your mind that I'm a traitor to the cause, I'll supply you with the names of two or three dozens of others against whom you'll have to accept the same charge or else repudiate the man who makes them. Let us get this matter settled. We can't have a man going around trading on his past and accusing everyone who disagrees with him of being a Government Agent. That sort of thing can't go on". But it could. In the very next issue of *The Socialist*, Maclean repeated his charge against Gallacher. "I have insisted in public", he wrote, "that you never hit the governing class but they hit you back in reply. Gallacher obviously was their instrument this time. His letter to the SLP proves that".

Terry Brotherstone's assertion that "for a revolutionary socialist who had been Bolshevik consul in Glasgow to be alert to state surveillance at this period is, of itself, evidence of nothing else but political realism" begins to look a little foolish. That there were state agents operating throughout the organised working class goes without saying. During the immediate post-war years, with the Bolsheviks taking power in Russia and with Britain itself in a state of industrial and political unrest, the ruling class perceived the threat of revolution as a real one, and Basil Thomson had an extensive apparatus of spies in and around the labour movement. The very detailed information about Maclean himself contained in Thomson's reports to the Cabinet bears witness to this fact. But it is ridiculous to argue that this somehow legitimises Maclean's quite specific accusations against individual members of the movement with whom he had come into political conflict. The vast majority of them, we have no reason to doubt, were entirely innocent of involvement with the state, and Maclean never offered the slightest

proof that they were anything else. While we can find excuses for Maclean's behaviour, it is less easy to be charitable about supposedly serious historians who retrospectively associate themselves with Maclean's campaign of denigration against honest socialists.

It was in the SLP's paper that Maclean also published his *Open Letter to Lenin*, written to coincide with the second Communist unity conference of January 1921, in which he outlined his objections to the Comintern's official British section. It is significant that in this letter Maclean made no appeal to Lenin to support the formation of a separate Scottish section of the Communist International, nor did he raise the question of an independent workers' republic in Scotland. He did mention the issue of Russian gold, in the context of a denunciation of Francis Meynell, the editor of the CPGB weekly *The Communist*, who had earlier been exposed for smuggling Russian diamonds into Britain to subsidise the *Daily Herald*. But Maclean did not take the opportunity to challenge Lenin on the Bolshevik government's right to subsidise the Comintern's sections. Far from questioning the legitimacy of the International, the whole purpose of the *Open Letter* was to convince Lenin that Maclean and his comrades were the true revolutionaries from whom a section of the Comintern should be built.

The *Open Letter* is mainly notable for an explicit statement of Maclean's thesis, which he had been developing since the meeting with Lieutenant-Colonel Malone in November 1919, that the establishment of the CPGB was the result of a state conspiracy and that the party itself was led by government agents. In the course of the letter, Maclean returned to this point again and again. First of all, he asserted that some of the delegates to the Comintern's Second Congress (he obviously had Gallacher in mind) travelled to Russia "secretly" whilst the authorities were winking the other eye", and he later made the direct accusation that such individuals were "conscious... agents of Lloyd George and the property-owning class". Maclean cited what he claimed were distorted accounts by these delegates concerning the political situation in Britain, and he explained to Lenin that the reason for this misinformation was that "it is the business of the British government to deceive you and get you to make false calculations". He went on to argue that a Labour government would be brought to office, behind which the bourgeoisie would continue to rule. "This expedient of itself would not deceive you", Maclean told Lenin, "since you and your comrades have the exact measure of the leaders of Labour and the ILP, and that Lloyd George well knows. He must, therefore, make way for a Communist Party whose 'leaders' are controlled by him".

It can be seen that from late 1919 onwards Maclean's attitude to the construction of a united British section of the Third International underwent several shifts. But the central and consistent theme to his objections is quite clear. And this

was not that the formation of the CPGB was the product of Russian interference and Moscow gold, but that it was engineered by the Lloyd George government through spies and agents in the leadership of the revolutionary movement and that the whole operation was funded by the British state! Here two possible explanations suggest themselves. Either Maclean knew that these accusations were nonsense and simply employed them in order to discredit his political opponents, or the evidence of Gallacher and others is accurate and Maclean was psychologically disturbed. The first explanation is untenable; whatever failings John Maclean had, he was a man of unshakeable political integrity who would never have used such methods against his opponents in the labour movement. So we are left with the second alternative: that Maclean's hostile response to the formation of the CPGB was indeed in large part the product of an unbalanced mind.

Maclean was sentenced to two further terms of imprisonment in 1921, and was not released until October 1922. While in prison he had resigned from the SLP, apparently because of a dispute over the party's constitution, and he now began to organise his own political group. This was formally launched in February 1923 as the Scottish Workers Republican Party. While some of its members were won from the SLP, most of its recruits seem to have been politically raw individuals drawn into the organisation through Maclean's work with the unemployed. Harry McShane, who broke from Maclean to join the CPGB, recalls that the SWRP "had some queer people that I didn't like — they had never been to John's economics classes, they knew nothing about socialism or revolutionary work. Even if I had not joined the Communist Party I could never have joined with that crowd". The final period of Maclean's life was dedicated to building his new organisation, whose activities were restricted not merely to Scotland but almost entirely to Glasgow.

These closing years of Maclean's political career coincided with the CPGB's own, not unsuccessful efforts to establish itself as a force in the British labour movement. During the early 1920s the party to a large extent overcame its own rather chaotic origins and developed a degree of political intelligence, tactical flexibility and agitational sharpness which marked a considerable advance over the earlier practices of its various component groupings. As a consequence, the CPGB was able to exercise an influence in the labour movement, and especially in the trade unions, quite out of proportion to its small size. The formation of a British section of the Comintern, able to participate in the crucial debates on tactics, strategy and programme which took place in the International during this period, represented a qualitative leap in the politics of the revolutionary movement in Britain. As Brotherstone points out, Maclean's rejection of the CPGB shut him off from these important international developments, and this was an error

which had disastrous consequences for Maclean's political evolution. Not only did he remain trapped in the old propagandist conception of Marxism of the pre-October period but his politics underwent a distinct degeneration, lapsing into a sectarianism which makes nonsense of Ripley and McHugh's statement that 'Maclean needed no lessons from Lenin on ultra-leftism or infantile disorders'.

In November 1922, when Maclean again stood as a parliamentary candidate for the Gorbals (receiving 4,027 votes as against 16,479 for the successful Labour candidate), his campaign literature was almost entirely devoid of agitational demands. His election address, which consisted of a summary of his political career, a general analysis of economic and political developments and propaganda for world socialism, concluded with the assurance that "no detailed programme is necessary". He also announced that he would refuse to take his seat in the Commons if elected, in imitation of the policy earlier implemented by the Irish nationalists. But Maclean's position as the sole Scottish republican candidate bore no resemblance to that of Sinn Fein, which had won 73 seats in the 1918 general election and then established its own national assembly in opposition to the British parliament. Maclean's stand on this issue amounted in practice to a form of anti-parliamentarism which allied him with the ultra-left. Significantly, it was the Glasgow anarchist Guy Aldred who had first urged Maclean to adopt the Sinn Fein tactic.

A major challenge for Clydeside revolutionaries during this period was that the Labour Party, headed by the ILP, was establishing a mass electoral base in the Glasgow working class. Though hampered by its initial blunder in provoking its own exclusion from the Labour Party, the CPGB was able to avoid isolation from this process through its use of the united front tactic, adopted by the Communist International in recognition of the reality that reformist organisations and leaderships still held the political allegiance of millions of workers. Maclean's solution, by contrast, was to denounce the betrayals of the Labour leaders and appeal to workers to break from the Labour Party ('the Pinks', in his terminology) and rally to a minuscule revolutionary sect. Maclean's letters of the period are filled with ultra-left attacks on the united front. It is in this context that we must evaluate his denunciation of the Communist Party for having sold itself to Moscow and his call for "a real fighting party independent of outside dictation and finance".

In a vain attempt to establish itself as such a party, the SWRP engaged in electoral interventions which the CPGB rightly condemned as sectarian and divisive. In June 1923 Maclean stood for the SWRP in a council by-election against a Labour candidate who was supported by the ILP, the Communist Party, Glasgow Trades Council, the Co-operative Party and the local Unemployed Committee, with the result that the working class vote was split and victory



The Russian revolution

was handed to the bourgeois candidate. The SWRP played a similarly destructive role in the Glasgow municipal elections of November 1923 when they stood 12 candidates, all in wards contested by Labour. Their action was condemned by the CPGB as showing "a complete ignorance of working class political tactics. This deplorable exhibition of vanity is taking place at a time when the baby-starvers are contemplating the reduction of the parish dole. Every vote they take away from the Labour candidates is strengthening the Moderates. Every Labour defeat they cause will hearten the baby-starvers". In one ward, where the Labour candidate polled 5048, 155 less than the successful Moderate candidate, the 228 votes won by Alan Hannah of the SWRP did indeed ensure Labour's defeat.

More generally, in circumstances where only a tiny minority of the working class was ready to back a revolutionary alternative, the SWRP's vitriolic attacks on the Labour Party had the effect of simply dissuading potential Labour supporters from voting. When the SWRP contested a council by-election in July 1923 the Labour vote fell drastically as a result of large-scale abstentions, and Maclean convinced himself that this display of political passivity represented a shift to the left. "Many people were staggered by our work into not voting at all", he told James Clunie. "Next time they'll come down right on our side for ever after". The absurdity of this prediction was demonstrated in November, when the SWRP again succeeded in persuading many workers that there was no point in voting Labour but received only a derisory number of votes for its own candidates. Even Maclean himself, who had polled over 4000 in Kinning Park a year earlier, was now reduced to a humiliating 623 votes in the same ward, where the Labour candidate received 3440.

Maclean's industrial policy was another example of his failure to engage with developments in the labour movement. In the early 1920s trade union membership and militancy was in decline as a result of mass

unemployment and the demoralisation which had followed the miners' betrayal on Black Friday, 1921, and the AEU's defeat in the engineering lockout the following year. Under the slogans 'Stop the Retreat' and 'Back to the Unions', the CPGB fought to revitalise the trade unions and by 1923 was laying the foundations of the Minority Movement, in which CPers joined forces with non-party militants to build a rank-and-file opposition to both the employers and the union bureaucracy. Maclean's own response was to set up an Industrial Unity Committee which propagated a version of industrial unionism that marked no advance over the sort of thing that could be found in a work like James Connolly's *Socialism Made Easy* a decade and a half earlier. In a May Day manifesto Maclean set out his committee's plan for the abolition of capitalism:

"Every worker in a workshop should be in the same union, no matter what his or her job, and no matter the amount of training and skill required. Every worker in the same industry should be in *One Industrial Union*. Every Industrial Union ought to be joined up into *One Big Industrial Organisation embracing the whole working class*... Thus organised, the workers would be in a position to destroy the power of the capitalists over the agencies of wealth production, and to take over and work these agencies for the benefit of the workers. In other words, the industrial unity of the workers is the fundamental preparation for the establishment of the World Workers' Industrial Republic".

The reconstruction of the trade unions along industrial unionist lines was a policy supported by the Communist Party. In the meantime, however, the CP fought to overcome sectional divisions by building workplace committees. And while the party was committed to the transformation of the unions into instruments of revolution, it saw this as a long-term objective to be achieved through systematic work inside the existing movement. For Maclean, revolutionary industrial unionism was an ideal

schema, to which trade unionists were to be won by propaganda appeals from outside. His Industrial Unity Committee proved stillborn. Apart from the SWRP and the now virtually moribund SLP, the only body to back Maclean's initiative was TL Smith's Workers International Industrial Union, whose policy was to call on workers to abandon their reformist-led organisations and join a pure revolutionary union. Although Smith's group was unenthusiastic about Maclean's committee and broke from it almost immediately, this sterile conception of industrial unionism seems to have had some support within the SWRP itself. When Willie Gallacher asked one of Maclean's lieutenants, Robert Carlton, to describe the SWRP's programme, he was told that the party's aim was "political independence from England, and to achieve that the workers of Scotland would have to leave their unions and form up One Big Union for Scotland".

Maclean's work with the unemployed, which was his main sphere of activity during his final years, was vitiated by his refusal to link up with the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement, which was led by CP members like Wal Hannington. When Hannington spoke at a public meeting on unemployment in October 1923, organised by the ILP-dominated Glasgow Trades Council, Maclean's supporters shouted him down and the meeting had to be abandoned. Even the CP's provision of stewards for this event was condemned by Maclean as "acting as scavengers for the Pinks". In an earlier exchange of letters with the NUWCM, who had protested at his public declarations of hostility towards their organisation, Maclean insisted that only the SWRP could organise the unemployed. His 'unemployed committee' was thus reduced to nothing more than an SWRP front. He remained immune to the idea that a revolutionary tendency should demonstrate the superiority of its political leadership in the course of joint work with reformists and other political opponents in the movement.

None of this, it should be emphasised, is intended to detract from Maclean's heroic stature in the history of the labour movement in Scotland, in Britain and internationally. His resistance to imperialist war remains an inspiration, and the responsibility for his later psychological problems lies squarely with the capitalist state which persecuted him for his internationalist stand. But Maclean's self-isolation from the political process which led to the creation of the CPGB was quite clearly rooted in what can only be regarded as paranoid delusions, and the fact that this explanation was put forward by Willie Gallacher and Tom Bell, who played prominent roles in the CPGB's formation and later became hardened Stalinists, does not make it any less true. His subsequent politics not only remained affected by the familiar spy mania but degenerated into a combination of nationalism and sectarian ultra-leftism which represented no coherent alternative to the CPGB. Though he was always able

to draw large crowds to his meetings, by the time of his death in November 1923, Maclean had been marginalised, even in terms of local politics.

It is necessary to set the record straight on these matters, particularly in a situation where the collapse of the Soviet Union and the other 'socialist' regimes in Eastern Europe has led to a spate of bourgeois propaganda to the effect that the Bolshevik Revolution and all its consequences were rotten from the start. This is a view which finds an echo in the labour movement, even among those who would claim to be Marxists, and John Maclean's antagonism towards the early CPGB can serve as a hook on which to hang such anti-Bolshevism. There can be no doubt how Maclean himself would have treated attempts to use his political record as the basis for an ideological assault on the October Revolution. He would have rejected them with anger and contempt. ■

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