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Revolutionary Communist at Work: A Political Biography of Bert Ramelson

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Bert Ramelson, one of the leading figures of the post-war Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and the Party?s Industrial Organiser during the era of heightened industrial militancy in the 1960s and 1970s, has been a widely debated person in the historiography of the CPGB, but a new biography by Roger Seifert and Tom Sibley attempts to reassess the characterisations of Ramelson by other authors. As Industrial Organiser from 1965 to 1977, Ramelson oversaw the Party?s ?broad left? strategy, which outlined that the primary focus of the CPGB was to attempt to seek influence in the trade union movement by obtaining leadership positions with the unions and promote alliances with other leaders of the labour movement who were on the Labour left. This period was characterised by Willie Thompson as the Party?s ?Indian summer? and has been described by a number of authors as a time when the CPGB had the potential to shape the political landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ramelson has been criticised from both the right and left over the years ? by the right for being a dangerous and subversive Communist agent, by the Trotskyist left for being a reformist who had abandoned socialism for a mixture of labourism and Stalinism, and by the Gramscian/Eurocommunist left for concentrating on industrial action at the expense of other areas of political struggle. In the historiography of the Communist Party after its dissolution in 1991, Ramelson and the Party?s industrial strategy was depicted by Francis Beckett as a conspiracy that directed the actions of

the trade unions and wielded powerful influence over the Labour Party, while Geoff Andrews criticised the same strategy for its failure in shaping the direction of the labour movement, and in Andrews? book, Ramelson is a marginal figure.

But it was John McIlroy and John Callaghan who explored in most detail the industrial strategy and Ramelson?s role within it. McIlroy and Callaghan had, in different papers, argued that the Communist Party?s plan to shift the direction of the labour movement by occupying key positions in the trade unions and promote working with Labour left trade unionists, such as Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, had limited success in achieving this and relied on attempting to wield influence within the upper echelons of the unions, while ignoring the mass base of the rank-and-file. For McIlroy and Callaghan, the Communist Party?s claims of ?victories?, such as the defeat of the Harold Wilson?s anti-union policies, the resistance to Heath?s Industrial Relations Bill and the Miners? Strike which brought down the Heath Government in 1974, were spurious, as the Party?s industrial wing was largely in step with the broader leadership of the trade unions and did not seek to radically move the agenda of the labour movement at this time towards a revolutionary socialist programme.

The new biography of Ramelson by Seifert and Sibley is essentially a refutation of the arguments put forward by McIlroy and Callaghan and attempts to portray Ramelson as a revolutionary man of action, who was crucial to the direction of the labour movement during what Chris Harman called the ?British upturn?. Seifert and Sibley claim that Ramelson and the CPGB were trying to link ?militancy and trade union struggle to the development of a mass socialist consciousness? (p. 340) and that the CPGB was a ?revolutionary socialist? organisation (p. 167), with Ramelson guided by an inherent faith in the class struggle and Marxism-Leninism. However, one of the major criticisms of this biography that can be made is that the authors do not really expand on what was ?revolutionary? in the Party?s industrial strategy or how the CPGB could be deemed to be ?revolutionary? after the adoption of the parliamentary road to socialism in 1951. The narrative contained within this biography is essentially based on the ?traditionalist? politics of the CPGB (now taken up by the Communist Party of Britain and the *Morning Star* newspaper), which emphasised industrial militancy as the practical manifestation of the class struggle, combined with (critical) support for the Soviet Union. This wing of the CPGB, and its remnants in the CPB, were disapproving of Stalinism, but much more vocal in their criticism of the ?Euros? who took over the Party in the 1980s. The authors seem to suggest that to call the industrial/broad left strategy undertaken by the CPGB in the 1960s/70s ?labourism? or ?reformism? is a Trotskyist ultra-left slur, but the programme set out in *The British Road to Socialism* placed emphasis on using the trade unions to foster a Communist-Labour left alliance to achieve socialism via the parliamentary system. This is not a revolutionary programme. Even the major industrial struggles of the period when Ramelson was Industrial Organiser were not progressive struggles to expand socialist policies through the labour movement, but defensive struggles to protect trade union and collective bargaining rights, as well as the maintenance of wages in line with inflation.

The authors rightly argue that Ramelson?s life is worthy of a biography, as someone ?who lived through remarkable times? (p. 13), as Ramelson fled the Ukraine during the Russian Civil War, lived in Depression-era Canada and British-ruled Palestine, fought in the Spanish Civil War and then in the Second World War, all before migrating to Britain in 1946 and joining the Communist Party (all dealt with in one chapter in this biography). But in their attempt to ?trace Bert?s personal contribution to the struggle, and to show how this related to and influenced developments within the broader labour movement?, there is a tendency to overstate what Ramelson (and the CPGB) achieved in the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and downplay some of the more controversial episodes in Ramelson?s (and the Party?s) life.

For instance, the account of the fallout within the Party in 1956 over Khrushchev?s ?secret speech? and the publication by E. P. Thompson and John Saville of *The Reasoner* to foster debate about the Party?s uncritical support of the Soviet Union during the Stalin era minimises the lack of debate that the Party leadership allowed and the reasons why people like Thompson and Saville ended up leaving. The authors portray Ramelson?s offer of more space in the *Daily Worker* and *World News*, as well as district meetings with ?much sharper debates and many less unanimous votes?, as reasonable, while Thompson and Saville are seen as unreasonable, writing that ?both had had lengthy articles published in *World News and Views*

during the *Reasoner* episode? (p. 66). But the Party still refused to publish radically dissenting opinions by Party members in its press, as seen with the non-publication of a letter to the *Daily Worker* by a number of the CPGB?s Historians? Group in November 1956 after the Soviet invasion of Hungary (eventually published by the *New Statesman* and *Tribune* in December 1956). In several spots in the same chapter, the authors seem to suggest that the CPGB was at the forefront of the 1950s peace movement and nuclear disarmament activism. This is in contradiction to the arguments put forward by Nigel Young, David Widgery, John Callaghan and Geoff Andrews, amongst others, that the CPGB was slow to support unilateral disarmament and the CND in the 1950s, preferring until quite late on to promote the idea of the ?People?s Bomb? (this is a point also raised by Ian Birchall in his review of this book for the London Socialist Historians? Group bulletin).

As mentioned before, in the industrial struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, the Communist Party had leading members working closely with other high level labour movement officials and these were quite successful campaigns, such as the Liaison Committee for the Defence of Trade Unions? actions against Wilson?s *In Place of Strife* Bill, the flying pickets of 1972 or the Miners? Strike of 1973?4 that forced Ted Heath into an early election. However it is this reviewer?s opinion that the authors are claiming too much credit for Ramelson and the Communist Party when they write sentences, such as this about the success of the victory of the Saltley Gates picket in 1972: ?Only the CP in 1970s Britain could have provided the strategic guidance and the solidarity links so necessary for winning the dispute? (p. 208). As McIlroy and Callaghan have argued elsewhere, while the labour movement had forward momentum, the Communist Party looked central to the struggles of the day and Party members were deeply involved in the practical running of these industrial campaigns, but the Party was not directing these campaigns and this lack of influence became increasingly evident when the momentum of the labour movement slowed in 1974.

In this biography, after 1974, Ramelson becomes a lonely figure of the ?correct? Marxist-Leninist line against the right-wing of the labour movement and the impending Eurocommunists. In 1974, Ramelson broke with Jones and Scanlon over the adoption by the TUC and the Labour Party of the Social Contract, a voluntary wages freeze and a promise of mediation with the trade unions over industrial action, with Ramelson famously calling it the ?Social Con-trick? (p. 227). The authors state that by 1977, ?Ramelson had been proved right and the CP line was vindicated? (p. 236), but there is a suggestion that too many in the Party, such as those influenced by Gramsci and Eurocommunism, as well as intellectuals such as David Purdy and Eric Hobsbawm, had lost faith with the centrality of militant industrial action. What the authors do not engage with is the argument put forward by many in the Party who were disillusioned with the emphasis on this broad left industrial strategy is that even after the successes of the early 1970s, there was little to show for the massive effort involved in these campaigns and that the CPGB was powerless to stop the labour movement from adopting policies such as the Social Contract, and the alliances with the wider union leadership turned to be less than satisfactory, after Ramelson was effectively dropped by Jones and Scanlon after the TUC and Labour Party agreed to wage freezes and industrial mediation.

Ramelson retired from the position of Industrial Organiser in 1977, replaced by Mick Costello, who was a key figure in the battles between the *Morning Star* ?traditionalists? and the ?reformers? coalesced around the journal, *Marxism Today*. But as the authors show, Ramelson still contributed to Party debates and disagreed sharply with the ?Eurocommunists? within the CPGB, believing that the *Marxism Today* group had abandoned the class struggle and misinterpreted Thatcherism as something different from preceding Conservative governments. The authors are obviously sympathetic to the same position as Ramelson, but it is interesting to note that Ramelson also disagreed at times with the *Morning Star* group and some of the figures that were instrumental in forming the Communist Party of Britain in 1988. Ramelson favoured unity between the two factions and the book shows that he tried to get General Secretary Gordon McLennan to more strongly intervene in the factional disputes in order to save the Party from splitting irreversibly. But by this time, it seemed that intervention by the leadership would only temporarily halt the decline of the CPGB, and not reverse its fortunes. Ramelson remained a member until the end, but did not join the CPB (unlike a number of his contemporaries), with the only position held by Ramelson after 1977 being the British representative to the journal, *World Marxist Review*, which was published for all the parties in the Soviet

sphere and edited in Prague until 1989.

This biography oscillates between some very good historical details of Ramelson?s role in the Communist Party between the 1940s and the 1980s and some very grandiose rhetorical flourishes about the importance of the class struggle and the revolutionary outlook of the CPGB. Its use of Ramelson?s personal papers, interviews with leading CPGB activists and other primary source materials makes it definitely worth reading for those interested in the history of the Communist Party, and modern British labour history more generally, but some readers may be frustrated by the particular language used, as well as some of the claims made, by the authors.

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