

Opposition to the New Party: an incipient anti-fascism or a defence against ‘Mosleyitis’?¹

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Within histories of British fascism and anti-fascism, opposition to the New Party has attracted scant attention. The preamble to more serious episodes of conflict between Mosley’s Blackshirts and their anti-fascist opponents, it typically invites only the most cursory of accounts. However, as this article demonstrates, labour movement opposition to the New Party should not be dealt with simply as a form of embryonic anti-fascism. The author argues that it was a dual-faceted phenomenon, and whilst it did share obvious similarities with later campaigns against the British Union of Fascists, it was also dissimilar in other respects.

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From the very beginnings, and through its short existence, the New Party encountered organised disruption from labour movement opponents. Before the ink had even dried on the statement announcing the formation of the New Party, the *Daily Worker* had already labelled Mosley ‘our “English Hitler”’.² At the inaugural meeting of the New Party in London’s Memorial Hall on 5 March 1931, Cynthia Mosley had to suffer

interruption from various parts of the hall. One persistent heckler was almost thrown over the balustrade by a burly steward, giving rise to shouts from the audience of ‘How do you like your Fascism now?’³ In the weeks that followed, as it unveiled itself to the British public, disruption occurred at a succession of New Party meetings.⁴ One meeting in Liverpool was said to have closed in ‘absolute uproar’ when Communist leaflets, exposing the ‘fascist’ nature of the New Party, rained down on the audience from the gallery.⁵ Scenes of pandemonium occurred the following month at the Ashton-under-Lyne by-election where Labour Party opponents harassed the ‘Judas Mosley’ at the declaration. Then, in September 1931, at one of the largest open-air meetings ever held in Glasgow, Mosley was chased and stoned by opponents.⁶ During the New Party’s ill-fated October 1931 general election campaign, its meeting at Birmingham’s Rag Market ended in riotous disorder. Even after April 1932, when the New Party had ceased to exist as a political party, and when all that remained was a series of New Party youth movement (NUPA) clubs, Mosley’s followers still attracted labour movement antipathy. Disorder occurred at outdoor meetings in Greenwich and Deptford where a NUPA club (no. 2) was active.⁷ In July 1932 a fight between Mosley’s followers and opponents in Hyde Park was reported in the columns of over twenty newspapers.⁸ Just weeks before the British Union of Fascists (BUF) was formed, Croydon Town Hall was the scene of clashes between Mosley militants - some of whom had already donned blackshirts - and left-wing opponents.⁹

This article, then, appraises both the nature and extent of this labour movement opposition, a subject that has been generally overlooked by historians in both the voluminous literature on British fascism, and within the newly emerging field of anti-fascism.¹⁰ Was it true that ‘All over the country’, the New Party ‘met a

storm of organised violence’, as Mosley’s autobiographical account claims?¹¹ What relationship, if any, did labour movement opposition have with later campaigns against the British Union of Fascists? Did opposition to the New Party represent an incipient anti-fascism? Or was it more a case of the labour movement defending itself against a perfidious attack of ‘Mosleyitis’? Appropriately (and apparently) coined by Arthur Greenwood, the Labour Minister of Health, ‘Mosleyitis’ constituted a disease of ‘short duration’. ‘It is like measles’, Greenwood had remarked during a speech to Labour supporters in Cynthia Mosley’s Stoke constituency in April 1931, but ‘We shall soon get over it, and after the next election’ the New Party ‘will be as dead as the parties or groups which in the past have founded themselves on ambition and impatience’.¹²

Responding to Mosley and the New Party

Mosley’s decision to form his breakaway New Party in early 1931 sickened Labour’s leadership. The root cause of such indignation lay deep within the Labour Party’s organisational consciousness. Traditionally, as Skidelsky explains, the Labour Party had seen itself as,

a party of rebellion - a movement of the weak against the strong. But the one hope of the weak lies in their numbers; and numbers are useless without discipline. That is why when the crunch comes the Party tends to close its ranks and follow its leaders, why appeals to 'solidarity' nearly always succeed.¹³

Party unity was always jealously guarded and Mosley had broken it. To make matters worse, this break had occurred at a time when sensitivity to this issue was especially acute. This was no surprise given the precarious position that MacDonald's Labour government now found itself in. Within a minority government, struggling to come to terms with a rapidly deteriorating economic situation, parliamentary indiscipline, 'invariably impeded by the relentless hostility of the House of Lords', and 'subject to continuous attack through a network of daily, evening and weekly newspapers',¹⁴ there was obvious concern that further dissent within Labour's ranks might cause the party to fracture.

Notwithstanding a 'few footloose orphans from other parties',¹⁵ the Mosley rebel MPs had comprised a small group of left-wing Labour Party dissidents. A member of the National Administrative Council of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) from 1927 to 1929, Mosley was identified with (and he identified himself with) the Labour 'Left'. Moreover, of those that had tendered their resignations from the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) in support of Mosley, that is to say, John Strachey (24 February), Dr Robert Forgan (24 February), Oliver Baldwin (26 February), Cynthia Mosley (3 March), and William J. Brown (4 March), Cynthia Mosley, Strachey, Forgan and Brown were all members of the ILP. Brown, moreover, was

secretary of the ILP's Parliamentary Group and it was Brown who had looked to bring together the ILP parliamentary contingent with those MPs gathered around Mosley.¹⁶ For a moment, with the ILP on the brink of disaffiliation from the Labour Party,¹⁷ it was feared that that the ILP might secede and join Mosley, along with some trade unionists such as the miners' leader Arthur Cook and Anuerin Bevan, who had both expressed support for Mosley in late 1930.¹⁸ What's more, beyond Labour's left-wing critics, there were also concerns that the New Party might become a 'home-from-home' for more moderate elements disheartened by the failings of the MacDonald government. Labour leaders were only too aware that Mosley, widely touted as a future party leader, was hugely popular with the rank-and-file. Only a few months before, he had been elected to the Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) for a third time with some 1.36 million votes.¹⁹

Although Mosley had been well-liked by MacDonald, with whom he had once shared a friendship - journeying together to Prague, Berlin and Vienna in 1928²⁰ - it was outside the corridors of Westminster where Mosley commanded most admiration. Whilst the majority of the PLP retained their suspicions,²¹ expressions of support were far more effusive when Mosley took to the public platform. With speeches filled with fiery rhetoric, as Frank Ridley recalled, Mosley 'was cheered to the echo up and down the country'.²² Amongst the Labour Party's grassroots the image that Mosley cultivated was that of a dynamic, passionate and confident young man, selflessly forgoing the interest of his own class in order to defend the working class, especially the massed ranks of the unemployed. As a champion of unemployed workers, Mosley's aristocratic background had given him a certain cachet. But once outside the party, Mosley's social origins exposed him all too quickly to Labour's class-based scorn. He might not have been the only well-heeled recruit to Labour,²³ but by first

sowing dissension within the PLP and then breaking away, Mosley had, for Labour's leaders, revealed his true pedigree as an overweening, thoroughbred aristocrat. Here was someone who, because of his personal wealth and social position, was so used to giving orders that he acted like a 'free-lance' and 'self-elected leader', placing personal ambition above loyalty to the party.²⁴ Moreover, by seeking to mobilise 400 candidates at the next general election, and by arraiging the Labour front bench for its betrayal of socialism, Mosley's New Party had declared open hostilities on Labour. And whilst Labour leaders were prepared to tolerate some difference of opinion, they could not stand idly by and tolerate the formation of a new party, especially one intent on waging a war against it in Labour's own working-class heartlands. As the *Daily Herald* warned, 'The Mosleyites... have not merely differed from the Party, they have declared war on it... And they will be treated accordingly'.²⁵

What this meant in practice, more on later. But what of the part played by anti-fascism? Did this figure anywhere in the retort of Labour's leaders? It was during one heated exchange in the Cabinet room, just prior to Mosley's resignation from his ministerial post that Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Snowden, had accused Mosley of treachery, declaring before the assembled Ministers that the public would have no time for a 'pocket Mussolini'.²⁶ All the same, and in spite of the occasional prescient remark that the New Party would end up fascist – a comment tellingly made by Aneurin Bevan – Labour's leadership made little use of anti-fascism.²⁷ One reason, no doubt, was that the party leadership had little to no theoretical understanding of fascism beyond simply equating it with 'dictatorship'. In their eyes, Mosley was an impatient, ostentatious, self-aggrandising man who, in wanting to form a five-man inner executive committee in Whitehall, was intent on destroying parliamentary democracy and replacing it with a 'Mosley dictatorship'. It followed that he was a

‘fascist’, but this was not a characterisation that Labour’s leaders zealously brought to the fore. Surprisingly, the word ‘fascist’ seemed in greater use during the October 1931 general election campaign when pressed into service not against the New Party but against the MacDonald-Baldwin ‘National’ coalition. A vote for the political oligarchy of the ‘Nationals’ was for the *Daily Herald*, a vote ‘against democracy, a vote against freedom, a vote for the pinchbeck Fascism of a bunch of pinchbeck Mussolinis’.²⁸

More than the Labour Party, it was the Communist Party (CP) that responded with appeals to anti-fascism. Since Mosley was associated with the ILP and the dissident Labour ‘Left’, the CP’s initial response was determined by its desire to break the credibility of ‘Left Labourism’. Still in its ‘class against class’ phase, and on constant vigil against ‘social fascism’, the CP saw Mosley’s New Labour group, and the publication of its manifesto in late 1930, as a sinister new stage in the social fascist development of both the ILP and the wider Labour Party. Mosley’s Manifesto, which alongside Arthur Cook, also boasted a number of ILP signatories,²⁹ had been dismissed by the CP as an attempt to trick the workers into accepting capitalism. The fact that Jimmy Maxton, and several other ILP leaders had distanced themselves from the manifesto, claiming that it ‘put socialism in the background’, made little difference. ‘Left Labourism’, the CP declared, was the ‘reserve weapon of the bourgeoisie’, and the only difference between the social fascism of Mosley and that of Maxton was the method, not the principle.³⁰

With the formation of the New Party, however, the CP’s analysis started to shift. As the Communist Party’s Central Committee minutes record, by the middle of March 1931, since Mosley had abandoned the ‘phraseology of socialism’, it was agreed that the New Party should no longer be classified as ‘social fascism’, but rather

as ‘incipient fascism’ or ‘fascism in embryo’. The significance of the New Party having recently recruited W.E.D. Allen, the Belfast Unionist MP was not lost on Harry Pollitt either who described Allen as an ‘out and out Fascist’.³¹ The CP must be ready to act, Pollitt declared. ‘We cannot laugh’ at the New Party ‘and to underestimate it would be a mistake’.³² For Pollitt, resistance to the New Party was now imperative. If left unchallenged Mosley might strike a resonant chord with two different strata of the working class, Pollitt thought: impressionable youth, seduced by attractive slogans promising a ‘a national plan for a national emergency’, and those aged between 45 and 55 displaced by economic rationalisation, who had lost all hope of being re-absorbed into the workplace.³³

Did the New Party amount to a ‘fully-fledged’ or ‘actual’ fascism? Not yet, Pollitt argued, because the New Party retained contacts with those within the Labour Party and ILP, who although unwilling to jump ship, had still not given up the fight for the programme that Mosley had originally put forward. Hence Pollitt suspected that Allan Young, secretary of Mosley’s New Party would attend the ILP’s annual conference at Scarborough in April 1931 ‘with the idea of influencing a considerable element who are dissatisfied with the I.L.P., and will try to canalise this discontent in the direction of Mosley’.³⁴ If truth be told, Pollitt’s suspicions were not without foundation. Many of the New Party’s earliest recruits had originated from the ILP,³⁵ and if in Scotland, those that joined the New Party had been quickly expelled from the ILP, dual membership had been tolerated elsewhere. Nonetheless, Mosley had limited residues of ILP support. ‘The “Left” on the whole regarded Mosley’s projects as “reformism”’, W.J. Brown later wrote, and even though he had resigned from the PLP, Brown balked at joining the New Party following the publication of an interview with Mosley in the *Observer* which had given the New Party a ‘quasi-

Fascist complexion'.³⁶ At the ILP's Scarborough conference, when Maxton ruled that membership of Mosley's New Party was inconsistent with membership of the ILP, there were few dissenting voices. One delegate (from Birmingham) did declare that this announcement had 'come like a bombshell to the representatives of his area', and it was his belief that there was still sufficient socialism in New Party policy to allow for some leniency with the rank-and-file (if not for party officers and public representatives). Another Midlands delegate was quick to deny, however, that 'any considerable number of members would be involved in the Midlands'. In any case, Maxton held firm - there was no socialism in the New Party, he maintained.³⁷

Maxton chose not to raise the spectre of fascism in his conference announcement. From the start, rather than anti-fascism, the ILP's reading of the New Party had been determined by Mosley's call for 'class collaboration'. Since political parties had to represent economic interests - 'otherwise they were meaningless and cannot endure' - the ILP had dismissed the New Party's call for class collaboration as a mirage. For the ILP, 'Permanent political formations are not called into being by the waving of a magician's wand. They cannot be created merely to reflect a striking personality. Nor can they continue indefinitely merely because they command great financial resources'. Accordingly, the New Party 'is building on shifting sands'.³⁸ The tone of such a response, more dismissive than alarmist, was certainly mild in comparison to that of the CP. Needless to say, it provided further weight to the CP's argument that the only practical influence that the ILP had served in recent years was to 'provide the jumping-off board for the Mosley group and its programme of a fascist type'.³⁹

So, if the New Party represented an incipient fascism, what was the nature of the CP's opposition to it? Was it, likewise, an embryonic anti-fascism? It is surely

tempting to see it as such. As the well-documented CP-led mobilisations against Mosley's BUF at Olympia and Hyde Park in 1934 show, when Mosleyism developed into fully-fledged fascism, the CP graduated its response accordingly. But for two reasons, such a linear interpretation is too neat. To begin with, increasing the cause (fully-fledged fascism) did not necessarily increase the effect (mobilisation of anti-fascist opposition). There was a downward trend in the level of CP opposition during the first five or six months of the BUF's existence. Not until *after* Hitler's seizure of power in March 1933 did anti-fascism really gather pace. Even then, for some time, the BUF could still claim that opposition in the old New Party days had been more obvious. Drawing on figures provided by the Home Secretary, the BUF crowed that disturbances had taken place at less than 2 per cent of Blackshirt meetings during the last six months of 1933.⁴⁰ Secondly, if the CP's anti-fascism was 'embryonic' in 1931, then it must have had a lengthy *pre-embryonic* stage. Already, in 1924, left-wing militants had formed the first anti-fascist organisations in order to counter the British Fascisti, later known as the British Fascists.⁴¹ The CP had also called on the working class to organise against fascism in 1925 following the kidnapping of Pollitt by a group of British Fascists. Then, during the General Strike in 1926 the CP formed an anti-fascist Workers' Defence Corps – all of this numerous years before Mosley's New Party was formed.⁴²

The Nature of Opposition

How then, did labour movement opposition to the New Party manifest itself? As we have seen, what mattered to the Labour Party was unity, loyalty and discipline. These concerns determined a response that was calculated to isolate Mosley and his

followers, nullify their appeal and shore up core support. On 10 March 1931, taking advantage of the fact that Mosley was incapacitated by illness, the Labour Party's National Executive Committee met and expelled Mosley from the Labour Party for his 'gross act of disloyalty'. In a further move, the NEC resolved that membership of the New Party was incompatible with membership of the Labour Party. At no point in the NEC resolution was Mosley or the New Party condemned for being fascist. Discussion followed relating to five constituency parties affected by the Mosley secessions, that is to say Smethwick (Oswald Mosley), Stoke (Cynthia Mosley), Aston (John Strachey), Dudley (Oliver Baldwin), and West Wolverhampton (W.J. Brown). It was decided that large meetings should be held in each of these constituencies, all featuring national party speakers.⁴³ The West Midlands, clearly the region deemed most at risk, received a high-profile visit in April 1931 from the Prime Minister himself. Seven hundred and fifty tickets for MacDonald's meeting at the Town Hall in West Bromwich were sold to the affected constituencies of Aston, Dudley, and Smethwick.⁴⁴ Elsewhere in the region, Hebert Morrison, Minister for Transport, spoke in neighbouring Dudley, whilst in Stoke, Arthur Greenwood implored that 'Now that war has been declared', the New Party 'must be trampled underfoot'.⁴⁵ No further measures were deemed necessary, not least because the local Labour parties in these five constituencies had already repudiated the Mosley MPs. They had been joined too by the divisional Labour Party in West Renfrewshire, which had dissociated itself from its Mosley MP (Dr Robert Forgan), and recommended selection of a new Labour Party parliamentary candidate.⁴⁶

Given the geography of the Mosley secessions, reaction in the West Midlands, and particularly in Birmingham, would foretell whether the New Party's bark would be far louder than its bite. Historically, even though it was Britain's largest industrial

city, the appeal of ‘cloth-capped Chamberlain-ism’ had rendered Birmingham Labour Party largely anonymous. Mosley had arrived in the mid-1920s with a promise to drive the Chamberlains from the city and make Birmingham the heart of the Socialist movement in England. Narrowly defeated by Neville Chamberlain in the Ladywood seat in 1924, Mosley was returned to Parliament for Smethwick in 1926, and again in 1929. 1929 marked the high-point of Labour support in the city and Birmingham brought the best set of results for Labour across the entire country.⁴⁷

Mosley had played (or at least was widely seen to have played) a central part in occasioning this success. For Skidelsky, he had taken ‘an impoverished, sluggish party by the scruff of the neck, infused it with his own dynamism (and money) and used it to break the hold of the Chamberlain dynasty’.⁴⁸ Admittedly, there was some lingering resentment amongst local activists, since as the CP’s Rajani Palme Dutt put it, ‘On the basis of his great wealth and influential connections’, Mosley had ‘advanced with an extreme rapidity unattainable to ordinary working-class members of the Labour Party’.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, having drawn from his own funds to provide financial support for campaigns, as well as for the city’s struggling Labour weekly - the Birmingham *Town Crier* – Mosley was much-admired amongst the Borough’s Labour Party. Significantly, Mosley also obtained the services of several key local Labour Party figures. Allan Young, former political organiser for the Birmingham Borough Labour Party, was made general secretary of the New Party, and from the city’s Aston district came Labour MP John Strachey, and Strachey’s local agent, Dan Davis. If anywhere offered the possibility of a working-class turn to the New Party, it was Birmingham.

Yet the city’s Labour Party did not yield - it made sure that when the New Party came into existence it did so without grassroots support.⁵⁰ From the very start,

the *Town Crier* poured scorn on Mosley and the New Party. Mosley was portrayed as an arrogant, reckless adventurer who had never understood the character of the Labour Party, ‘in it but never of it’, in Hugh Dalton’s words.⁵¹ Questions were raised about where the New Party was getting its money from with rumours circulating that it was funded by the car manufacturer Sir William Morris in a bid to destroy Labour.⁵² That the Unionist MP for West Belfast had joined the New Party was also publicised. Furthermore, there were allegations that the New Party had attempted to buy Labour Party organisers in Birmingham with offers of paid employment.⁵³ As the president of Birmingham Labour Party, J. Johnson was to write, these underhand tactics were ‘beneath contempt’ and had made his ‘blood boil’.⁵⁴ With the *Town Crier* displaying its open opposition, the New Party fell on stony ground. The fact that Mosley was laid up with illness certainly helped Labour’s cause. Had Mosley visited Birmingham, he might have been able to use his personal appeal to win over some of the rank-and-file. That said, the idea that he could have persuaded large numbers of Labourites to cast off their party allegiance was more a case of wishful thinking. Labour supporters had given a hostile reception to a New Party meeting held at the Astoria in Birmingham in March 1931, with both Cynthia Mosley and John Strachey heckled.⁵⁵ The same was true for a public meeting held in Aston Park in May 1931 where Strachey was subjected to taunts of ‘traitor’.⁵⁶ As MacDonald had told his 1,500-strong audience at West Bromwich Town Hall, ‘I was under the impression that this was what is called a “disturbed area.” The only disturbance I have found is your wild demonstration of absolute loyalty to Socialism and the Labour Party’.⁵⁷ The mistake the organisers of the New Party had made, as Johnson saw it, was ‘to think that Mosley’s personal popularity here in the past would take us with him anywhere he might like to go in the future’.⁵⁸

The most concrete example of Labour's open hostility to the New Party occurred not in the West Midlands, but in the distressed Lancashire cotton town of Ashton-under-Lyne. A parliamentary by-election in April 1931 occasioned the most dramatic expression of Labour's antipathy. Mosley was the New Party candidate in all but name, and after the declaration, while on the town hall steps, he was confronted by hundreds of furious Labour supporters. Their rage had been ignited by the belief that the New Party's intervention had defeated the Labour candidate and secured election for the Conservative. According to John Strachey, when faced with the violent hostility of the crowd at Ashton, Mosley turned against the working class and 'At that moment British Fascism was born.'⁵⁹

'Judas' and 'traitor' were the cries directed at Mosley, who had been warned by a senior Labour Party agent not to venture outside Ashton town hall otherwise he would be lynched by the crowd,

For several minutes he stood there, his hat in his hand, held up in an effort to obtain a hearing. But it was useless. The crowd, waving their hands, moved forward and a cordon of police was at once thrown across the bottom of the steps... It was a dramatic moment. Just for a second it seemed touch and go as to whether Sir Oswald and his friends would or would not be actually attacked.⁶⁰

In the event, as Mosley recalled, 'I went through the crowd with a few companions and we suffered no serious injury.'⁶¹ Seeing as meetings addressed by Mosley in the week before polling day had passed off without incident (the *Ashton Herald* had reported 'scenes of remarkable enthusiasm' for Mosley and the New Party candidate

at an election meeting attended by nearly 6,000 at the Armoury),⁶² it had evidently been the result that had incited the opposition, not the New Party's campaign itself.⁶³

The events at Ashton confirm that Labour's anger was driven first and foremost by feelings of betrayal, and not anti-fascism. Ashton also allowed Labour supporters 'to work off the frustration engendered by the shortcomings of the MacDonald government', as Colin Cross has previously noted.⁶⁴ But to propose that Ashton somehow pushed Mosley to fascism is surely too simplistic. It was early 1932 before Mosley committed to the fascist cause, and as Matthew Worley has convincingly argued, 'Such a journey was not inevitable; alternative paths were taken by New Party members, and were considered by Mosley throughout.'⁶⁵ In any case, Labour's antipathy soon cooled. The reasons why are clear enough. As a political force, what Ashton had demonstrated was that the New Party was not worth worrying about. If it could not break through in Ashton – a town with 46.2 per cent unemployment - it would not break through anywhere. The *Birmingham Town Crier* estimated that it would take the New Party a quarter of a century to put itself on the political map.⁶⁶ Secondly, although the Mosley manifesto had originally been signed by 17 MPs,⁶⁷ the New Party's effective strength in parliament had never exceeded more than six, and it had further dwindled to just four by the time Strachey departed in July 1931.⁶⁸ Arthur Greenwood had demanded to know: 'Where are the thirty of forty dissatisfied members of the Labour party whom he thought he was going to carry with him? They have vanished like smoke, and he is left with a little skeleton crew'.⁶⁹ Indeed, of the remaining four rebel MPs, 'W.E.D. Allen was always a writer rather than a speaker, and Dr. Forgan was distinguished more for his agreeable manners and pleasing personality than for platform performance', as Mosley later conceded.⁷⁰ To all intents and purposes, Oswald and Cynthia Mosley now made up

the body of the New Party membership in the House of Commons. Moreover, since February, the New Party had largely absented itself from the House, and in so doing marginalised itself, arguing that attendance was futile given the dearth of specific policies to deal with unemployment. Thirdly, outside the House, fearing a split in the Labour movement, the miners had soon dropped their support for Mosley once the New Party was formed. Arthur Cook never made any public declaration of support for the New Party, and besides, following a leg amputation in January 1931 and further debilitated by illness, he was no longer a factor. Cook had limited influence in the TUC and it kept its distance. Although sympathetic to the Mosley Memorandum, Ernest Bevin on the TUC General Council helped steer it on a moderate course. Finally, when the New Party re-entered the political fray in the autumn of 1931, the Labour Party's major preoccupation now lay with other 'traitors', not least Ramsay MacDonald.

Even though the Communist Party had participated in early shows of opposition, it was not until September-October 1931, when the CP took the lead, that hostility to the New Party turned more violent. By this time, the New Party had exposed 'proto-fascism' at its core, thereby validating the CP line that Mosley's New Party was evolving from the womb of 'social fascism' to 'open fascism'. In May 1931, Mosley had decided on establishing a body of young men who could give 'physical support' to the New Party programme and protect its meetings. His promise that the 'only methods we shall employ will be English methods. We shall rely on the good old English fist' did little to cancel out the inevitable comparisons with continental fascist movements.⁷¹ 'Nor were suspicions eased', as Skidelsky points out, 'when two New Party officials left for Munich apparently to study Hitler's methods'.⁷² This was soon followed with proposals for a series of extra-parliamentary

youth groups (NUPA), through which Mosley intended to counter the communist threat in the event of a revolutionary crisis. Such developments, alongside the New Party's developing fascination with the idea of a corporate state, led both Strachey⁷³ and Young to resign from the New Party alleging that Mosley was leading it 'in a Conservative or Fascist direction'.⁷⁴

At Glasgow Green in September, Mosley was howled down, chased across a field and subjected to a barrage of sticks and stones. Three members of his bodyguard were slashed with razors.⁷⁵ On 2 October, the New Party's Sellick Davis, a former Liberal candidate for Evesham, was knocked unconscious following an assault from behind by an opponent at a meeting in Glasgow.⁷⁶ On 18 October, at Birmingham's Rag Market, a section in the 15,000 crowd wielding chairs and chair legs charged the platform. Bottles were hurled and a free fight ensued. Three men, including the North-East London regional secretary of the New Party, received hospital treatment.⁷⁷ The next evening at Glasgow's St Andrew's Hall, the entrances were stormed and there was a stampede. Outside, a section of the assembled crowd threatened to throw Mosley into the Clyde.⁷⁸ Elsewhere, Sellick Davis, the New Party candidate in Merthyr saw his election campaign 'punctuated by stones, bottles and "The Red Flag"'.⁷⁹

Yet for all the hardening of this opposition, when Mosley or other New Party candidates appeared on the platform, their appearance did not always trigger violent disturbances.⁸⁰ Rather than anti-fascists, it was the weather that intervened when Mosley had opened the New Party's autumn campaign at Trafalgar Square on 12 September 1931. Flanked by two dripping lions, he was forced to address a sea of umbrellas. When Mosley had held a meeting in Birmingham on 25 September, *Action* reported that he had received a 'splendid reception' - only at an overflow meeting of

7,000 in Chamberlain Square did Communists ‘yell’.⁸¹ During the general election campaign itself, orderly election meetings were held by Mosley both at Reading and at Stoke. His first campaign meeting in Stoke saw 2,000 people inside the hall, and a further 1,500 outside listening to his speech through loudspeakers. Mosley’s speech was made with no interruptions whatsoever.⁸² A further ‘tightly-packed’ meeting was subject to some interruption, but this did not stop Mosley from making a large number of points.⁸³ On one day in Stoke, Mosley spoke at no fewer than eight outdoor meetings.⁸⁴ In Manchester, although subject to much interruption from left-wing militants, New Party candidate Sir John Pratt, a former Liberal MP and Under-Secretary of Health for Scotland, was able to hold ten meetings in eleven days.⁸⁵ At one well-attended meeting, he had been given ‘an attentive hearing’.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, in Scotland, Robert Forgan had apparently been ‘well-received’ at his campaign meetings in West Renfrewshire.⁸⁷

What all of this should warn against is overplaying, as Mosley’s autobiography does, the extent to which the New Party was subject to violent opposition. It is simply not true that violence followed Mosley wherever and whenever he spoke. This also raises questions about the extent to which CP opposition was systematic. If truth be told, the New Party never dominated the CP’s concerns in 1931. Indeed by September-October, the issue of mass working-class agitation was of far greater importance. By the end of the year, there had been disturbances between the police and unemployed across more than 30 towns and cities. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the question of how to advance the CP to mass revolutionary leadership on the basis of economic demands would assume far more significance than exposing the fascist potential of the New Party. With just 2,700 members in June 1931, and little more than 6,200 by November, the CP’s

central concern was to overcome its own weakness and isolation so that it could take maximum advantage of what it understood as an ongoing process of mass radicalisation.⁸⁸ After all, the recent influx of members - membership of the CP was up to 9,000 by January 1932⁸⁹ - had not been occasioned by anti-fascist campaigns but by the collapse of the Labour Government.

Setting a Pattern?

Did opposition to Mosley's New Party set a pattern for fascist and anti-fascist confrontation after 1932? The similarities are obvious. 'From the first', writes Skidelsky, 'there emerged a pattern which hardly varied throughout the 1930s: vast audiences of the curious come to hear the prophet, groups of angry Labour militants and communists determined to prevent him from being heard'.⁹⁰ Yet heckling and rowdy behaviour were hardly new to political meetings and so to suggest that a distinctive pattern of behaviour was first established in 1931 is somewhat crude. As Jon Lawrence has pointed out, pre-war traditions of disruption at political meetings were sustained into the interwar period, especially in major cities, such as London, Glasgow and Birmingham.⁹¹ Taking a broader view still, the meetings of other national politicians were also subject to disruption during the 1931 election campaign. At one election meeting in Liverpool, convened in support of a National Labour candidate, the former Labour Employment Minister, J. H. Thomas, was howled down three times by 'Everton Rowdies' who subjected him to cries of 'traitor'.⁹² As the *Birmingham Gazette* reflected, 'Lively meetings, with brisk heckling, are part of the game. Candidates expect them and - if they are up to their job - enjoy them'.⁹³ What seemed different about the New Party's meetings in Birmingham and Glasgow,

however, was the violence, aggravated further by Mosley's use of a personal bodyguard which underscored his determination not to be silenced or intimidated. It was this violence that was carried through into later campaigns against the BUF. And yet, too much can be made of such violence. After the events at Olympia, the CP made attempts to curtail physical confrontation at large BUF meetings. The CP wanted to break Labour Party rhetoric, which had identified left-wing militancy with the type of disorder that had led to the rise of fascism on the continent.⁹⁴

For its part, Labour's policy towards the BUF developed from its 1931 reading of Mosley as a potential dictator. For Labour, anti-fascism meant opposition to dictatorship. And since it also identified Communism with dictatorship, Labour refused to co-operate with the CP in anti-fascist campaigns. Once again, it looked to expose Mosley as an aristocratic enemy of the working class.⁹⁵ More accommodating was the ILP. Following its disaffiliation from the Labour Party in 1932, it undertook joint anti-fascist action with the CP which had, in light of the Nazi seizure of power, called for a 'united front' against fascism.

Opposition to the BUF also had a much broader base. It need hardly be added that as a consequence of the prominence that the BUF afforded to anti-Semitism, the Jewish community became involved in anti-BUF campaigns. But for the moment at least, Mosleyites did not give the Anglo-Jewish community much cause for concern. In fact, the New Party had recruited a number of Jews, including Edward 'Kid' Lewis, former welterweight boxing champion and head of the New Party's stewarding section. Furthermore, contemporary accounts, such as Cecil Melville's *The Truth About the New Party* (1931) stressed that Mosley's New Party was 'not addicted to any race-conscious feeling. It is not Anti-Semitic'. Melville was confident that 'We shall not witness in London the spectacle of cohorts of young Mosleyites heaving

half-bricks through the plate-glass windows, of, say, Messrs. Salmon and Gluckstein'.⁹⁶ Yet it is now quite clear that the New Party harboured anti-Semites. In the summer of 1932 there were reports of a speaker from Mosley's 'New Movement' having opened a meeting with 'Down with the Jews'.⁹⁷ There was also a case of a Mosleyite being arrested for plastering anti-Jewish posters on a drapery shop in London's Oxford Street.⁹⁸ As one activist was to write in the New Party's internal newsletter,

A tiny movement such as ours simply cannot afford in its early stages, openly to abuse the Jew, or to make anti-Semitism its main plank... Let us wait until we have developed, until we have grown and become a power in Britain: then we can translate our hatred of the despicable parasites – who seek to profit in our downfall – from futile words to deeds!⁹⁹

Conclusion

On final reflection, in contrast to labour movement opposition to the BUF, which was driven by anti-fascism, we can disaggregate opposition to the New Party. In other words, it was not simply a case of 'incipient anti-fascism' or a defence against 'Mosleyitis' – the opposition to Mosley contained elements of *both*. First of all, we had the Labour Party's response which, as we have seen, defined itself in terms of resistance to upper-class treachery or 'Mosleyitis'. Then there was the Communist Party's 'incipient anti-fascism', which started out as opposition to 'social fascism', before moving on to attack the New Party's 'fascism in embryo'. This is not to say that Labour hecklers did not cry 'fascism' or that Communist hecklers did not accuse

Mosley of treachery. Whilst disaggregation was reproduced at the grassroots, it was not rigidly so, especially when the Communist Party was so keen to exploit the resentment felt by Labour supporters at Mosley's 'betrayal'.¹⁰⁰

When re-aggregated as a whole, this opposition was certainly not without effect. By frustrating the New Party's attempts to build support in working-class constituencies in the Midlands, North and Scotland, labour movement opposition was an obvious factor in its failure. But this was just one reason amongst several others. Organisational deficiencies and the fact that the New Party was ignored by the press also readily spring to mind. In the end, Mosley's New Party was simply overtaken and overwhelmed by political events. During October 1931, crowded out by the 'national' appeal of the MacDonald-Baldwin coalition, and Labour's radical turn, Mosley had the electoral ground cut from under his feet. Left without a platform on which to stand, the New Party was obliterated at the polls.¹⁰¹ The orange marigolds that its candidates wore in their button holes now well and truly discarded in the waste bin of British political history.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank Janet and Dave Dack for their invaluable help in the collection of research materials, and Dr Graham Ford for giving comment.

² *Daily Worker*, 23 February 1931.

³ *Daily Herald*, 6 March 1931.

⁴ Owing to Mosley's pleurisy, meetings planned in Aberdeen, Birmingham, Bradford, Bristol, Edinburgh and London's Albert Hall had to be cancelled. Cynthia Mosley deputised for Mosley, supported by John Strachey, Oliver Baldwin and Dr Robert Forgan.

⁵ *Daily Worker*, 18 March 1931.

⁶ See *Birmingham Gazette*, 21 September 1931.

⁷ See *TNT-The New Times*, no. 2, July 1932, 3; and no. 3, August-September 1932, 7.

⁸ *TNT-The New Times*, no. 3, August-September 1932, 9.

⁹ See *Manchester Guardian*, 29 August 1932; *Daily Herald*, 29 August 1932; *Croydon Times*, 3 September 1932.

¹⁰ For a useful guide to the historiography of British fascism and its different traditions, see Thurlow, *Fascism in Modern Britain*, 1-11.

¹¹ Mosley, *My Life*, 286.

¹² See *Manchester Guardian*, 27 April 1931.

¹³ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 222-23

¹⁴ See Chairman's Address, Labour Party Annual Conference Report 1931, 155.

¹⁵ Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, 86.

¹⁶ See Brown, *So Far*, 157.

¹⁷ Following the ILP's Easter conference in 1930, the ILP Parliamentary Group had been reconfigured on the basis that membership involved acceptance of ILP policy. Of the 140 Labour MPs who belonged to the ILP, only 18 accepted membership on these terms and relations between the ILP and Labour became increasingly strained.

¹⁸ In December 1930 Mosley published his manifesto. The signatories included both Cook and Bevan.

¹⁹ Mosley was elected to the NEC at the Labour Party's annual conference, held at Llandudno in October 1930. His conference resolution calling on the NEC to consider his proposals was narrowly defeated, however. One delegate shouted 'The English Hitler' during Mosley's conference speech, see Pugh, *Hurrah for the Blackshirts!*, 118.

²⁰ Melville, *The Truth About the New Party*, 29.

²¹ In May 1930 Mosley's resolution condemning the Labour government had been rejected by the PLP by 202 votes to 29, Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars*, 360.

²² See *Socialist Leader*, 15 June 1957.

²³ Charles Trevelyan, Arthur Ponsonby and Hugh Dalton, for example.

²⁴ See comments made by Hebert Morrison (Minister of Transport), speaking in the West Midlands, *Birmingham Town Crier*, 17 April 1931.

²⁵ See the *Daily Herald*, 11 March 1931.

²⁶ See Melville, *The Truth About the New Party*, 30, and Cecil. F. Melville, 'Political Upheaval'.

²⁷ See Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, 133.

²⁸ See *Daily Herald*, 26 October 1931. The idea that the formation of the National Government represented a 'fascist coup d'etat' lingered on for some time in Labour circles.

²⁹ The signatories from the ILP included Batey, Horrabis, McGovern, McShane, Philips-Price, and Simmons. The manifesto was later expanded into *A National Policy*, authored by Young, Srahey, Brown and Bevan.

³⁰ See William Rust, 'The Mosley Manifesto'.

³¹ See Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC): Report of the Central Committee of the CPGB, 14-15 March 1931.

³² See *Daily Worker*, 27 March 1931.

³³ See LHASC: Report of the Central Committee of the CPGB, 14-15 March 1931.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The New Party made a direct appeal to the ILP membership through publication of a pamphlet, *The New Party and the ILP*, New Party Broadcasts, No. 3, 1931. This was

written by Robert Forgan and Marshall Diston (former treasurer of the London and Southern Counties Division of the ILP). For the CP's response to this pamphlet, see *Daily Worker*, 29 April 1931.

³⁶ Brown, *So Far*, 157 and 159.

³⁷ See *Manchester Guardian*, 8 April 1931.

³⁸ *New Leader*, 6 March 1931.

³⁹ *Labour Monthly*, vol. 13, no. 4, April 1931, 207.

⁴⁰ *The Fascist Week*, 2 – 8 March 1934, 1.

⁴¹ The People's Defence Force and the National Union for Combating Fascismo.

⁴² See Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 5-12.

⁴³ LHASAC: Minutes of the Labour Party National Executive Committee, 10 March 1931.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 18 April 1931.

⁴⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 27 April 1931.

⁴⁶ See *Glasgow Herald*, 23 March 1931.

⁴⁷ For a history of the Labour movement in Birmingham, see Hastings, 'The Birmingham Labour Movement, 1918-1945'.

⁴⁸ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, p. 172.

⁴⁹ Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution*, 265.

⁵⁰ In June 1931, the *Daily Herald* estimated that the New Party's membership was as low as 1,000.

⁵¹ See the *Daily Herald*, 16 March 1931.

⁵² In January 1931 Morris handed Mosley a cheque for £50,000 (equivalent to £1.7 million today). Dorril, *Blackshirt*, 161.

⁵³ See *Birmingham Town Crier*, 6 March 1931; 13 March 1931; 27 March 1931; 17 April 1931.

⁵⁴ See *Birmingham Town Crier*, 6 March 1931, and J. Johnson, 'Birmingham Labour and the New Party'.

⁵⁵ See *Birmingham Town Crier*, 13 March 1931.

⁵⁶ See *Birmingham Town Crier*, 24 April 1931.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Johnson, 'Birmingham Labour and the New Party', 535.

⁵⁹ Strachey, *The Menace of Fascism*, 157.

⁶⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 1 May 1931.

⁶¹ Mosley, *My Life*, 284.

⁶² See *Ashton-under-Lyne Herald*, 2 May 1931.

⁶³ *The Times*, 22 April 1931.

⁶⁴ Cross, *The Fascists in Britain*, 47.

⁶⁵ See Worley, 'What was the New Party?', 39-63.

⁶⁶ *Birmingham Town Crier*, 8 May 1931

⁶⁷ When Mosley announced his decision to secede from the Labour Party, the *Daily Herald's* lobby correspondent had talked to six Labour MPs who had signed Mosley's manifesto. All said that they did not have the slightest intention of breaking away, see *Daily Herald*, 23 February 1931.

⁶⁸ Oliver Baldwin never joined the New Party and broke with Mosley following the Ashton by-election. He returned to the Labour fold in September 1931 and took a public stand against the BUF, penning a series of anti-fascist articles for both the *Daily Herald* and *New Britain* during 1933-34.

⁶⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 27 April 1931

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- ⁷⁰ Mosley, *My Life*, 283-84.
- ⁷¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 16 May 1931.
- ⁷² Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 258
- ⁷³ Following his break with Mosley, Strachey went on to become a leading figure in co-ordinating opposition to the BUF, see Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, 30-41.
- ⁷⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 24 July 1931
- ⁷⁵ See *Birmingham Gazette*, 21 September 1931; *Daily Worker*, 22 September 1931.
- ⁷⁶ *Action*, 8 October 1931, 10.
- ⁷⁷ See *Birmingham Gazette*, 19 October 1931; *Daily Worker*, 20 October 1931.
- ⁷⁸ *Birmingham Gazette*, 20 October 1931; *Glasgow Herald*, 20 October 1931.
- ⁷⁹ Francis, *Miners Against Fascism*, 87.
- ⁸⁰ *Action*, 8 October 1931, 10.
- ⁸¹ See *Action*, 8 October 1931 and *Daily Worker*, 25 September 1931.
- ⁸² *Manchester Guardian*, 15 October 1931.
- ⁸³ *Stoke Evening Sentinel*, 17 October 1931.
- ⁸⁴ *Stoke Evening Sentinel*, 26 October 1931.
- ⁸⁵ *Manchester Daily Dispatch*, 24 October 1931.
- ⁸⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 15 October 1931.
- ⁸⁷ *Glasgow Daily Herald*, 12 October 1931 and 14 October 1931.
- ⁸⁸ See LHAS: CPG: Central Committee Resolutions, December 1931.
- ⁸⁹ These figures are from Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism*, 159.
- ⁹⁰ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 248.
- ⁹¹ See Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics After the First World War'.
- ⁹² *Manchester Guardian*, 19 October 1931.

⁹³ *Birmingham Gazette*, 19 October 1931.

⁹⁴ See Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain*, esp. 29-30.

⁹⁵ See the Labour Research Department pamphlet, *Who Backs Mosley?* (1934).

⁹⁶ Melville, *The Truth About the New Party*, 46.

⁹⁷ *Sunday Express*, 31 July 1932.

⁹⁸ *Jewish World*, 26 August 1932.

⁹⁹ See *TNT – The New Times*, No. 3, August-September 1932, 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, 256.

¹⁰¹ The total vote for the 24 New Party candidates was 36,777 from over 21 million votes cast – almost 40,000 less than the CP with 26 candidates. Mosley came bottom of the poll in Stoke, although he did save his deposit. On the New Party and the 1931 general election, see Smith, ‘The New Party and the British General Election of 1931’.

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