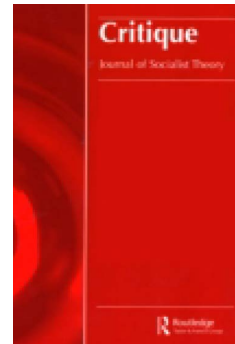


**Gidon Cohen: *The Failure of a Dream:
The Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation
to World War II***

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In July 1932 at a special conference in Bradford, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) voted to disaffiliate from the Labour Party in protest at the betrayals of the disastrous Labour Government of 1929–1931, and pledged itself to build a socialist alternative. As Gidon Cohen notes in his welcome new history of the ILP during the 1930s, ‘this was the most important Left-wing split in the history of the Labour Party’ (p. 15). Yet as Cohen also demonstrates, the subsequent decline quantitatively (from about 16,000 members in 1932 to under 3,000 by 1939), and in influence compared to the Labour Party and Communist Party during the period of the Great Depression, was a more complicated and uneven process than most historians have acknowledged. For example, despite having lost a huge number of members in some key regional areas, particularly Scotland and Lancashire, the ILP managed to retain a national profile and organisation, and was aided in electoral battles by its deep historic roots in the British working class, which it could still draw upon for sustenance in certain areas. After the General Election of November 1935, despite fierce competition from the Labour Party, the ILP therefore managed to emerge with four MPs in one of its heartlands in Glasgow’s ‘Red Clydeside’ on top of its several thousand members and 30 or so councillors nationally. From where we stand today, that looks remarkably impressive for a left of Labour organisation.

Nor was ILP decline somehow inevitable, the unavoidable consequence of socialists attempting the impossible by trying to build a radical, principled left political alternative to the Labour Party. Rather, Cohen suggests, primary attention needs to be given to the domestic and international political environment, those ‘external elements, structures and behaviour beyond the control of the ILP’ that limited the potential space for the Party to grow – as well as internal political questions which the failure of the ILP to answer or settle meant it failed to take those opportunities that existed (p. 4). There is therefore much detailed discussion of ILP competition and often intensely fractious rivalry with the Communist Party and Labour Party in the context of such world-historic defeats for the international working class, as the rise of Hitler’s Nazis to power and the Spanish Civil War, as well as the ever-present factionalism that no doubt tested the patience and drained the spirits of many members. Yet what also emerges from Cohen’s work is a quite remarkable story of how the ILP succeeded – to some extent at least – in also renewing and ‘remaking’ itself during this period, clarifying itself a little ideologically and even attempting to make a brave new turn towards industrial work. Cohen’s work may have actually been improved had it been structured around developing this argument rather than

adopting a thematic approach, which at times lends itself to repetition. Cohen notes the ILP ‘tradition of “ethical socialism” which saw the necessity of creating a party which carried the core of socialism within itself’ (p. 41), but perhaps he might have explored this ‘prefigurative’ culture of the ILP in more depth, and discussed some of the reasons why it was attractive to some of the most remarkable intellectuals in Britain during the 1930s, from George Orwell to the ‘class struggle Pan-Africanist’ George Padmore (who played a critical role in organising the ILP’s anti-colonial work). Indeed, Cohen might have made more use of the ILP supporting *Controversy* journal (later called *Left*), and while he does not aim to play down the importance individual leading figures played at a local and national level, this reader would have appreciated more by way of brief biographical ‘character sketches’ to introduce the likes of James Maxton, Fenner Brockway, John McNair *et al.* That said, Cohen does offer tantalising glimpses of the vastly diverse forms of ILP activism, from charismatic Scottish firebrand Maxton addressing 3,500 strong rallies in his Glasgow stronghold, to one branch in Cornwall making blackberry and elderberry wine and hatching a batch of ‘ILP chickens’ (p. 41).

The ILP ultimately failed to realise its dream of building a socialist alternative, in part because fundamental principles were at times subordinated to pressures from pacifist and parliamentary currents. The party leadership resolved the inevitable tension between reformists and revolutionaries inside the organisation during the 1930s decisively in the favour of the Parliamentary Group around Maxton. Maxton’s Parliamentary Group abused the power it welded over the party’s democratic structures, even famously at the 1936 national conference in Keighley blackmailing Brockway, general secretary, by threatening to resign from the ILP if conference did not abandon its militantly anti-imperialist position with respect to Mussolini’s barbaric war in Ethiopia and adopt a pacifist non-interventionist position. That conference saw also the banning of ‘factions’ – which in practice meant the tiny Trotskyist Marxist Group around the Trinidadian intellectual CLR James – while the Parliamentary Group remained as unaccountable and overbearing as ever. Cohen notes Trotskyist historians have tended ‘to assume rather than demonstrate both the appropriateness, and particularly the implications for the ILP’s strategy of Trotsky’s characterisation of a centrist Party, standing between “Marxism and Reformism”’ (p. 3). Though much of Cohen’s own argument and analysis reinforces and demonstrates the validity of Trotsky’s characterisation, he himself seems reluctant to develop or draw out any explicitly Marxist conclusions besides noting that ‘in rather obvious ways the ILP had problems of leadership in the 1930s’ (p. 203).

Nevertheless, Cohen’s work is quite comprehensive, exhaustively researched and so important for anyone interested in the political landscape of 1930s Britain. It also retains relevance for today, particularly for those of us who still dream of helping to construct a democratic socialist alternative to the neo-liberals in New Labour. It also retains relevance today, particularly for those whose vision of socialism is rather closer to that of Ralph Miliband than that of his two sons.