

Red Strongholds Between the Wars

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(The author is currently engaged in writing a hook on Little Moscows¹ and is also jointly editing a volume of essays on the history of the Communist Party. Later this year, his book entitled *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-33* will be published.)

Our party has never been a mass movement. The constitutional link between the unions and the Labour Party has meant that in the last analysis Labour has served as the political expression of the organized working class, albeit with tensions and strains that are disguised by this bald formula. The advantages of this enduring relationship have been bought at a price: the pace of advance of the massed ranks have generally been dictated by the marching-speed of the slower contingents; and among more independent bands the casualties have been heavy.

Indeed the Communist Party is the only alternative working-class organisation to have operated continuously for the past sixty years. And despite its major role in organising the unemployed, in preparing and stiffening the General Strike of 1926, and in leading the fight against fascism, it was not until 1938 that Party membership reached 15,000.

Yet between the wars there were also certain localities in which the Communist Party was recognised as the leading political force. These localities were christened "Little Moscows" by outraged newspaper editors and the like, and the description passed into general usage. "Lawless Mardy. Red Reign of Terror. Thousands of Communists who Christen their Town 'Little Moscow'," announced the banner headlines of the *South Wales News* a fortnight after the end of the General Strike. In the same week the *Newcastle Chronicle* drew attention to the Durham village of Chopwell: "Under the Red Banner. Clutching Hand of Communism. Spectre of a Miniature Russia."

The description was taken up by the residents of these localities. We may take the following speech by Harry Bolton, a leading Chopwell militant and chairman of the local district council, which was given upon his release from imprisonment in 1926:

"All the warders and many of the inmates in that hotel knew that we came from Chopwell, and the chaplain, yesterday morning when we had to go before him, said, 'Well, Bolton, where are you going?' I said, 'Straight to Chopwell.' He said, 'I understand Chopwell is rather a riotous place.' I said, 'No, Chopwell is a city set on a hill that cannot be hid—(laughter)—and the only thing that differentiates it from other towns is that it is a little

bit higher in intelligence and in outlook than most of the other towns."

Holding up a red flag, Bolton declared that it was "symbolical of a movement" that would destroy capitalism and build in its place a New Jerusalem: it would "banish poverty, destitution, crime and all those things that were only by-products of capitalism. They were going to share in that great co-operative commonwealth; and he was pleased to be associated with the men and women of Chopwell in that great work."

The purpose of this article is to examine three such Communist strongholds, and suggest why it was that they gained such a reputation. It is not intended that their historical experience be taken as a universal model, for they were dependent on highly specific conditions. But their story can tell us something of value about Communist politics in the British labour movement.

Lenin Terrace and Gagarin Way

Let us start with the most immediate and obvious features of these Little Moscows. We are struck first of all by their declaration of a political identity. Chopwell has its Marx Terrace and Lenin Terrace, the Vale of Leven in Scotland has its Engels Street, and Lumphinnans in Fife its Gagarin Way. These, along with the painting of Marx or Lenin onto the union banner, the use of the red flag and many other devices draw our attention at once to the declaratory significance of a rich symbolism and iconography. They certainly do not indicate the absence of political conflict within the locality, for fierce struggles between militants and conservative residents continued throughout the inter-war years. In Mardy there was a Conservative Club which organised such activities as Empire Day tea parties, a League of Young Britons, a Women's Unionist Society and so on. Even within the miners' lodge there was perennial argument between the militants and Labour moderates who sought an accommoda-

¹ The author would welcome any assistance readers can offer in the preparation of this book. Please write care of *Marxism Today*.

tion with the state, the coal company and the union. *in* the Vale of Leven the influence of the left prevailed in the early 1920s and again in the 1930s, but there was an interim period of isolation and defeat during which the self-styled "moderates" won back control of local government. In Chopwell the strength of the militants ebbed so markedly after the defeats of the 1920s that by 1933 there were but four members of the Communist Party.

So the language and symbols of the Little Moscow cannot be taken as registering any final and complete triumph of proletarian objectives, and we must be careful not to exaggerate or idealise them as immaculate working-class communities. They operated primarily as aspirations, serving notice that the terms of political struggle had shifted onto a higher plane. The Little Moscovs were not just concerned with contesting local government and trade union struggles, nor with engaging in national political life—though all these activities were conspicuous. Nor is their particular status solely due to the fact that their obduracy brought them into unusually sharp conflict with capital and the state, making them into beleaguered centres of resistance—though they were so beleaguered and in every Little Moscow the police station was enlarged during the inter-war period; Chopwell was even created a new police division.

A Political Culture

They were Little Moscovs because all these aspects of militant working-class politics were linked up in a rich political culture. Socialist Sunday schools, workers' sport, unemployed bands, concerts, outings, labour college classes, old folks' evenings, Communist Burns suppers and even "red funerals" were all part of an affirmative endeavour to create their own style of living. The absence of such a political culture from modern working-class localities has often been noticed, and diagnosed as a weakness in the present-day movement. All too often we call on the recruit to engage in the more difficult and tedious tasks without offering them the support and comradeship that comes from a sense of belonging to a broad movement. But of course this fabric is extremely difficult to create. In the Little Moscovs it came into existence both as a continuation and a transformation of existing social forms, and made use of institutions that were already present. Thus the Mardy Institute Hall served as a meeting-place, a centre of recreation and education, and a communal kitchen during protracted strikes. And this politicisation extended to local government institutions—the Vale of Leven District Council replaced its libraries' subscriptions to the *Daily Mail* with orders for the *Daily Worker*, *Labour Monthly*, the *Left Review*, *New Statesman*, *Labour Research* and *Plebs*.

The background

What were the preconditions of such a transformation? Each of the Little Moscovs began as a working-class locality with a fairly clear geographical, industrial and social identity. Some were set apart physically, like Mardy which is situated at the very top of the little Rhondda valley, separated from the main Rhondda and Aberdare valleys by steep mountain slopes; or like the Vale of Leven which lies between Loch Lomond and the Clyde estuary, detached from the Glasgow conurbation by the great lava mass of the Kilpatrick hills. Others, like Lumphinnans, are actually contiguous with larger settlements but still possess an independent identity. An inhabitant of Lumphinnans was more closely bound into this tight collection of miners' rows than were the inhabitants of the larger and more diverse neighbouring burghs of Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly. The local economy of each of the Little Moscovs was dominated by one of the old staple industries—usually coal but not always, as in the case of the Vale of Leven which was a centre of textile dyeing. The overwhelming majority of their inhabitants worked locally for the same employer; and the fortunes of the shopkeepers, professionals, local businesses and tradespeople were closely linked. The ties of kinship, work, friendship and recreation overlaid each other, providing a strong sense of internal cohesion. The closeness of such localities was symbolised by the office of the bellman who was employed to walk the streets and summon inhabitants to meetings.

The First World War marked a turning point in the fortunes of many such industrial localities. Prior to 1914 they were still expanding and their inhabitants enjoyed fairly full employment and relative prosperity. A brief inflationary boom at the end of the war preceded a sharp contraction of their industries in 1921; and the partial recovery later in the 1920s was swept away in the intensified depression of the 1930s. Coal, iron and steel, engineering, shipbuilding and the textile industries all experienced structural crises, all the more profound in export sectors. The timing and severity of these crises varied from industry to industry and from region to region, but each of the Little Moscovs was hard hit. In the Vale of Leven unemployment rose rapidly until by 1922 half the workforce was affected; the proportion declined to a fifth in 1928, then rose rapidly to a highpoint of more than two-thirds in 1930, and more than a quarter were still out of work at the outbreak of the Second World War. In Mardy employment held up better at first, but of course there were lengthy stoppages in 1921 and 1926; thereafter a minimum level of a quarter of the miners were without work. From 1932, when the pits closed, a majority were unemployed until the war. The experience of Lumphinnans was similar but less

severe. And besides the unemployed, there were wage cuts in all the Little Moscows in the 1920s and again in the 1930s. Furthermore, the population fell as the young men and women left the areas in search of work.

The Old Order

The sudden contraction of each local economy at the end of the First World War coincided with a more general crisis in what we can characterise as the "old order"—and here we must make do with an oversimple summary of its main features. Up to the war each of the Little Moscows exhibits a fairly clear sense of hierarchy, order and place. The owner characteristically possessed an authority in the locality, buttressed by his patronage and the provision of various facilities. The schoolmaster and minister were also respected, even intimidating, figures of authority. Among the wage earners, there were strong behavioural norms: a boy would go from school to work at fourteen and serve his period of training, often in a family relationship. Upon serving his apprenticeship or winning his own place at the coal face, he would marry and establish his own household. There were fairly sharp distinctions between different grades of work such as between the printer or skilled tradesman and the general labourer in the dye and print works; of the hewer, the haulier and the surface worker in the mines. There was a clear difference between the "respectable" working-class family and the non-respectable or "rough", between the hard-working man who discharged his responsibility to wife and children, and the shiftless, godless, violent or drunken father; between the thrifty woman who kept a good home and the spendthrift slattern who neglected it. All these images are of course heavily tinged with a conventional and in some respects oppressive morality, but they were of profound material significance for working-class life. Indeed it was by practising a "respectable" life-style that the worker achieved that space, that degree of security, on which he could establish his own customs and his own organisational forms. The inhabitants of the pre-Little Moscows were no mere servants of their masters, for they had already fashioned their unions, their co-ops and their friendly societies. But their achievements were accomplished within a framework of capitalist hegemony.

The crisis

The increasing industrial unrest before the First World War and the union militancy that followed it, the profoundly disturbing experience of the war itself, and the rapid growth of the political labour movement all contributed to a crisis in this old order between 1918 and 1922. There was a pervasive sense of challenge to the old ways of such magnitude that things could never be the same again. In the Vale of

Leven it was already apparent during the 1918 General Election. The Vale had been a particularly patriotic area with companies of volunteers formed in each of its works during the nineteenth century, and more than five hundred residents (out of a total population of less than 20,000) died in the 1914-1918 war. During the 1918 election campaign, a group of discharged soldiers attended Conservative and Liberal meetings, heckled noisily, forced the abandonment of more than one meeting, and marched through the streets singing the Red Flag. One candidate was asked if he would bring to trial those responsible for the blunders in the Dardenelles, another if he favoured the release of John Maclean. And when the chairman of a Conservative meeting in the village of Renton appealed to that village's "great war record", we are told that the meeting "grew quite out of hand".

Over the next three years dissatisfaction became focussed on unemployment and local relief. Crowds of 2000 and more habitually gathered at the local fountain and marched on the parish council to demand better relief. When the school board refused to provide boots and clothing to necessitous children, a group of the unemployed invaded a board meeting to denounce its members as "a pack of inhuman brutes and monsters". The local minister who chaired the board was told that he was a Herod and that "your day is coming; the Vale boys will attend to you".

Similar shock waves are apparent in other Little Moscows, particularly during the coal strike of 1921. The miners of Mardy not only forced their own safety and enginemmen to damp the fires and flood the pits, they marched down the valley to Wattstown and forced the more moderate miners there to do likewise. The same was true of Lumphinnans, whose men and women formed part of a large crowd which toured the Cowdenbeath pits, intimidating managers and safety men, and throwing one into a nearby loch after a pitched battle with the police.

Such events were by no means unique to the Little Moscows. The whole of the Fife field and South Wales valleys were subject to military occupation in 1921. Lumphinnans was in fact overshadowed by another mining village, Bowhill, whose residents did not confine their activities to the pits but marched to a nearby railway station junction when the railwaymen's leaders called off the Triple Alliance, and there disrupted the yard's operations. But dramatic as these episodes were, there is a danger of them turning our attention away from the essential dynamics of the transition. What was happening in these years in a great many industrial localities all over Britain was a general challenge to the local hierarchy—not just the extraction of wage increases, the reduction of hours, nor even the emergence of Labour in local government and at Westminster, but

extending into the very fabric of social relations. The accepted hierarchies of skill and the forms of respectability, at least in their pre-war guise, were swept away to be redefined on a different basis. Hence the creation after the war of a network of Labour parties and Labour's achievement of government in 1924 were remarkably abrupt consequences of a profound solid change.

Iconoclasm

In these early years we can discern a calculated iconoclasm on the part of the militants, deliberately challenging the traditional authority of owner and minister alike. So just as the Reverend Gordon Maclean was subjected to constant harassment, so the chairman of the United Turkey Red Company of the Vale of Leven was brought before a committee of the county council where a Communist councillor lectured him on the defects of company-housing. When this Harry Christie, previously the dominant figure in the Vale, attempted to assert his dignity, he was told to keep his ass in his chair and shut up. The impact of such events on the general community is difficult to exaggerate.

Yet none of these elements—industrial militancy, political mobilisation or social iconoclasm—is unique to the Little Moscows. All were comparatively widespread at the end of the First World War. By mid-1921, however, the barometer was falling. Amidst mounting unemployment, the trade unions were pushed back onto the defensive until by 1926 the resistance of even the most powerful of them was broken: all had to accept wage cuts and the erosion of work customs. If the political momentum lasted long enough to push Labour into office in 1924, by the end of that year the Labour Party too had suffered severe reverses. So perhaps the central question to ask of these optimistic post-war years is the nature of the regime built on the ashes of the old order. Where the local working class was able to build a viable alternative that could withstand the buffets of the next fifteen years, there the historical forms of the Little Moscow are of significance; where no such alternative was created, the local bourgeoisie was usually able to reconstitute its authority, win back control of local government and impose wage cuts on the increasingly demoralised workers. The Little Moscows, in short, were localities that maintained an obdurate militancy long after the labour movement nationally had been pushed onto the defensive.

Politics

In determining the outcome, one important factor is the nature of the local political leadership. Indeed, this may well be the crucial factor since it is extremely difficult to specify a set of economic or social characteristics which are peculiar to the Little

Moscow. To understand the importance of political strategy it is necessary to appreciate that this was the formative period of the Labour Party in such areas. The unions were well-established, to be sure, but in the Rhondda, west Fife and industrial Dunbartonshire trade unionists were still at a point of transition from Liberalism (and in some cases Conservatism) to Labour. It must be emphasized that the constituency Labour parties were not established in any systematic fashion and hence that in these areas Labour and Communist organisations came into being practically simultaneously. The incomplete nature of this transition meant that the character of working-class politics had not yet set. It was still possible for militants to join the Communist Party without being isolated, as they were afterwards, from the broad labour movement; and still possible for them to fashion close and fruitful alliances with local members of the ILP and Labour Party. And for some time yet it was still possible for such local united fronts to resist the centripetal forces of the leadership of the national Labour Party and the TUC. The left, then, in the Little Moscows meant an alliance of Communists and all but the right of the Labour Party.

The form and purpose of these united fronts varied from locality to locality. In the Vale of Leven the local Communist, ILP and Labour branches worked under the banner of the Trades and Labour Council to win control of local government and provide better parish relief to the unemployed. The contraction of the dyeing industry made this the most important activity. While the working class did not always control local government, there were never less than three Communist councillors in the Vale for the next thirty years. In Mardy and Lumphinnans the miners' lodge was pivotal, and here again an initial coalition of young Communists and ILPers assumed control and kept it until the 1930s. Such was their success in Lumphinnans that most of the miners were carried into the new Reform Union of the Fife miners set up as an alternative to the undemocratic old union which Wullie Adamson ruled with an iron rod. The two unions reunited briefly in 1927 but at the end of the 1920s a new union, the United Mineworkers of Scotland, was set up when Adamson and the right in other Scottish mining areas refused to accept the result of union ballots. Once again Lumphinnans became a leading branch of the UMS. In Mardy the lodge stood firm after 1926 and refused to accept the company's demands for years after. Its support for Communist candidates in elections caused the lodge to be expelled from the South Wales Miners' Federation and it was finally wound up in 1934.

The problem of sectarianism

These stormy events testify to the strength of the

local alliance against outside pressures; yet they also involved deep and debilitating divisions. In Lumphinnans, as in Mardy, the militants found themselves increasingly isolated from the national trade union structure for both the UMS and the Mardy lodge were excluded from the national Miners' Federation, and in both cases were forced to submit by the mid-1930s. In the Vale of Leven, also, the Communists and Labourites were at loggerheads by the end of the 1920s and only recovered their supremacy over the local bourgeoisie by reconstituting the alliance in the early 1930s. These problems of isolation and bitter internal divisions are, of course, particularly associated with the period of Class Against Class between 1929 and 1933 when the Communists denounced their former allies as "social fascists". Some idea of the scale of such problems is provided by a letter written by David Proudfoot, a leading Fife Communist, to Allen Hutt at the end of 1928. The Cowdenbeath comrades (and Lumphinnans Communists participated in the Cowdenbeath branch of the Party) used their pit-paper to denounce some local miners as hypocrites and traitors solely because they had not supported Communists in a recent ballot. When challenged by Proudfoot, the Cowdenbeath "Hundred per-centers" claimed that "no personal reflection is being cast on" such traitors, and that the sole purpose of this language was to bring its recipients closer to the Party. Proudfoot's critical position is in some respects close to that of Arthur Horner, the leading Mardy Communist, who ran afoul of Party purists during the same period because of his refusal to carry out the policy of establishing an alternative and revolutionary industrial organisation.

Such problems were most acute between 1929 and 1931 but they were encountered on other occasions thereafter for sectarian memories cannot be buried overnight. But there is a more fundamental issue. Given the national structure of the labour movement and the increasing discipline imposed by the Labour Party, the Communists in the Little Moscovs faced a particular difficulty. They were in the unusual position of leading their local labour movements. On them fell the concentrated abuse of the local employers and magistrates. In Mardy, for example, there was a concerted campaign to make Arthur Horner appear as personally responsible for that village's hardships: when a pit was reopened at the end of 1932 and Horner elected checkweigher (the checkweigher was elected by the miners of a pit to see they were credited with the correct amount of coal) by a ballot among those chosen by the company for their tractability, the company posted the result of the ballot (as it had to do by law) side by side with a closure notice. Both in Mardy and Lumphinnans the police brought a series of vicious mass prosecutions. Under such pressures, the Com-

munist had to forge strategies that would, on the one hand, provide militant leadership, and on the other, cement their relations with more moderate residents. It was not easy to balance these two objects. In the Vale of Leven we find the Communists deliberately resisting the opportunity of adding to their numbers on the Trades and Labour Council on one occasion, preferring instead to work with and develop a sympathetic Labour man; while on another occasion falling out with the local Labour Party over Co-op elections. At times of greatest harmony, as in 1935, the Communist Party, ILP and Labour Party constructed a unity ticket of local government candidates and trounced the moderates. At times of greatest rancour, as in 1932, they opposed each other and let in the moderates.

Nor should sectarian excesses be thought of as all on one side. If the militants sometimes advocated policies that were too far ahead of popular opinion, their principal opponents on the right of the labour movement went much further in actually seeking to destroy any united front. It was Adamson's union in Fife that refused to accept majority decisions; it was the Miners' Federation that overrode the Mardy lodge and set up a new lodge that would reach an accommodation with the coal company; and it was the Scottish TUC that in 1941 finally blacklisted the Vale of Leven Trades and Labour Council.

Elections

The question of electoral work is extremely interesting and can only be briefly summarised here. Prior to 1927 the Labour and Communist Parties usually agreed on a common candidate, and mostly won. Between then and 1935 they usually disagreed. In parliamentary elections during those years Arthur Horner and then Harry Pollitt came close to winning the Rhondda East constituency in which Mardy is situated; Willie Gallacher eventually won the Lumphinnans constituency, West Fife; while the Vale of Leven's constituency, West Dunbartonshire, was mostly rural and the only Communist candidate won 2500 votes. In local government in Mardy during those years the Communist vote in Mardy was little less than Labour's; in the Vale of Leven it was a little more, but competition let in a Conservative majority. In Lumphinnans the Communists usually won unopposed. After 1935 Communist-Labour agreements were more common and results improved. In all three localities success was due to a constant contact with the voters and constant linking up of electoral work with other campaigns.

The Little Moscovs possessed outstanding leaders and readers of Arthur Horner's *Incorrigible Rebel* or Abe Moffat's *My Life* will appreciate their talents. The miners of Mardy elected Arthur Horner as their checkweigher when he was still in prison for

refusing to serve in the war. Even after he left the area in 1933 he exercised immense authority. There were several other Mardy Communists of considerable calibre, but Horner united their qualities of determination, courage and popularity with an outstanding tactical intelligence. Abe and Alex Moffat of Lumphinnans are equally celebrated among Scottish miners. The two most important leaders in the Vale of Leven, Dan O'Hare and Hugh McIntyre, are less well-known. Dan O'Hare was the outstanding agitator, Hugh MacIntyre displayed a keen strategical appreciation and his ability as a county councillor was such that he was elected convenor of the key housing committee by a Conservative majority. He still lives in the Vale and his lifetime of service deserves wider recognition.

The Interwar Period

We ought not to ignore one crucial point about the Little Moscows. Each of these localities displayed a keen admiration for the Soviet Union, which served as a model for the sort of society they sought to create. There were flourishing branches of the Friends of the Soviet Union; the Russian Revolution or some aspect of Soviet life was a recurring topic for public meetings or lantern-slide lectures, often given by a worker-delegate who had recently returned from a tour. There were reciprocal visits of children and sports teams; radio programmes from the Soviet Union were received. In accounting for this as yet uncritical admiration for the Soviet Union, we can appreciate how its practical achievements were stressed (and indeed one reason why the disclosures from the time of the Moscow trials onwards made little impact in the Little Moscows was that there was comparatively little attention to the politics and theory of Soviet Communism). In a period of mass unemployment and chronic under-utilisation of productive resources, the Soviet Union had a planned economy, public medical care, maternity welfare, state housing, and so on. In other words, the identification with the Soviet Union was an integral aspect of the constructive and positive emphasis on building a better alternative.

This identification helps to mark off the subject as one contained essentially within the inter-war years. This is not to deny the continued existence of militant localities after the Second World War, and the more recent example of Clay Cross echoes some of my themes. Yet the dynamics of the Little Moscow are surely specific to the inter-war years, and even the naming of Gagarin Way in Lumphinnans is a memorial to a tradition that was already decaying. There are several reasons for this change at the end of the Second World War. More or less full employment became a principal government policy, there was a rebuilding of the older industrial

areas, and a diversification of their economies. A far more effective set of social services cushioned most of the needy, and post-war conditions allowed for substantially greater social mobility. Moscow lost a great deal of its attraction to the labour movement as the Cold War, coupled with increasingly disturbing disclosures about Stalin's regime, estranged pre-war sympathies. The pre-war Little Moscow was increasingly drawn into the post-war Labour stronghold, subject to the depoliticising forces of patronage and decay which have beset the Labour Party in Scotland, Wales and the north of England.

Conclusion

How then should we understand the success of the Communist Party in such areas? I suggest that we must take two intersecting themes into account. The first is the prior existence of a sense of solidarity serving to knit the inhabitants of these working class localities together. The second is the capacity of the local Communist leadership to maintain that solidarity and transform it by giving it a more precise political definition. Unlike most other sections of the working class, the Little Moscows were thus able to fight for and win improvements in unemployment relief, housing and public health; they doggedly defended work-customs that were destroyed elsewhere and they maintained a fight against wage cuts. They were not always successful but they did sustain a sense of morale amongst the working class and a belief in its own capabilities when such qualities were in short supply.

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