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# THE NORTH-EAST AND THE CAMPAIGNS FOR THE POPULAR FRONT, 1938–39\*

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## *Introduction*

FRENCH COMMUNISTS AND SOCIALISTS pioneered the Popular Front, a strategy developed to combat the rise of fascism in the early 1930s. Demonstrations and a general strike called jointly by both French left parties in February 1934 defeated a threatened fascist coup. Formal agreement between the Communists and Socialists came in July 1934. Three months later French Communists went further, calling for an alliance of all progressive and democratic anti-fascist forces under the banner of a 'People's Front' (i.e. Popular Front).<sup>1</sup> The 'Dimitrov resolution', passed at the Seventh World Communist Congress in July–August 1935, brought the international Communist movement into line with these developments. Popular Front governments were elected in Spain in February 1936 and in France three months later.<sup>2</sup> The Popular Front strategy replaced the ultra-sectarian 'Class Against Class' policy of the 'Third Period'. Then Communist parties directed much of their invective at the leaders of Labour and Social Democratic parties, who they deemed 'social fascists'. The policy's effects were widely regarded as disastrous: it divided the German left so completely that Hitler could not but take decisive advantage.

In Britain, the urgent need was to defeat the National Government, which many on the left regarded as pro-fascist. The British engineered policy of non-intervention in Spain aided the fascist-backed rebels as it denied the democratically constituted

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<sup>1</sup> Some historians, such as Jim Fyrth, preferred the term 'People's Front', but it is synonymous with Popular Front. Orwell wrote that Communists liked 'People's Front' as the title lent the strategy a 'spuriously democratic appeal'. *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, ed. Jim Fyrth (1985), p. 6 and 'Spilling the Spanish Beans' in George Orwell, *Orwell in Spain* (2001), p. 217. The term 'Popular Front' was also unfortunate as it allowed critics such as J. Henderson to deem it an 'un-Popular Front' (with, as will be seen, justification in the North-East). *Blaydon Courier*, 13 May 1938.

<sup>2</sup> M. Thorez, *France Today and the People's Front* (1936); *The French and Spanish Popular Fronts. Comparative Perspectives*, ed. M. Alexander and H. Graham (Cambridge, 1989); *The Popular Front in Europe*, ed. H. Graham and P. Preston (1987); J. Jackson, *The Popular Front in France. Defending Democracy, 1934–1938* (Cambridge, 1987); J. Joll, 'The Frente Populaire After Thirty Years', *Journal of Contemporary History* [hereafter *JCH*] 1:2 (1966), 27–42; I. M. Wall, 'French Socialism and the Popular Front', *JCH*, 5:3 (1970), 3–20; J. Haslam, 'The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front, 1934–5', *Historical Journal*, 22:3 (1979), 673–91.

Spanish Republican government its international legal right to buy arms to defend itself. ‘Appeasement’ towards fascist Italy and Nazi Germany also appeared pro-fascist.<sup>3</sup> The policy reached its apogee with Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s flight to Munich to secure the agreement that gave Nazi Germany a sizeable piece of Czechoslovakia on 30 September 1938.<sup>4</sup>

A Popular Front government led by Labour and including Liberals (and being supported by the Communist Party and even anti-appeasement ‘progressive’ Conservatives in some versions) would commit Britain to building up a ‘peace bloc’ of countries. Some on the left thought that this could occur through a reinvigorated League of Nations. There was, after all, wide support for the principles of the League of Nations in the Labour and Liberal parties. Popular Fronters believed that an alliance with France, Russia, America and other democracies could halt fascist expansionism. However, most left-wing Labour Popular Fronters also argued against supporting the National Government’s moves to rearm. These arms, they claimed, were more likely to be used to support fascism than to combat it.

Popular Front agitation did not take the form of a nation-wide, cross-party grassroots campaign explicitly devoted to advancing the strategy until 1938.<sup>5</sup> Before then, the left largely concentrated on promoting co-operation within its own ranks, which many regarded as an important first step to forging an alliance with Liberals and other ‘non-working-class’ organizations.<sup>6</sup> This was the object of the 1937 ‘Unity

<sup>3</sup> The appeasement policy has been the source of considerable historical debate. For a recent critical account of Chamberlain and appeasement see R. J. Q. Adams, *British Politics and Foreign Policy in the Age of Appeasement 1935–9* (Basingstoke, 1993). For a defence of Chamberlain see J. Charmley, *Chamberlain and the Lost Peace* (Basingstoke, 1991). For a balanced yet critical recent study see F. McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War* (Manchester, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> A. Horner, *Towards a Popular Front* (c.1937); G. D. H. Cole, *The People’s Front* (1937); G. D. H. Cole, ‘The British People’s Front. Why, and How?’, *Political Quarterly*, 7:4 (Oct.–Dec. 1936), 490–98; Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977); J. Campbell, *Nye Bevan and the Mirage of British Socialism* (1987); M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan, 1897–1945*, vol. 1 (1982); D. Little, ‘Red Scare, 1936: Anti-Bolshevism and the Origins of British Non-Intervention in the Spanish Civil War’, *JCH*, 23 (1988), 291–311; D. Carlton, ‘Eden, Blum and the Origins of Non-Intervention’, *JCH*, 6:3 (1971), 40–55; R. Douglas, ‘Chamberlain and Eden, 1937–38’, *JCH*, 13:1 (1978), 97–116.

<sup>5</sup> Before 1938, the Popular Front in the North-East was manifest only in the composition of its two peace councils, four Spanish Aid Committees and in some Left Book Club branches. Lewis H. Mates, ‘The United Front and the Popular Front in the North-East of England, 1936–1939’ (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Newcastle Univ. 2002), pp. 33–47, 274–75.

<sup>6</sup> Communists and many on the Labour left regarded left unity (the united front) as a prerequisite for a successful Popular Front. Eric Hobsbawm thus described the Popular Front as ‘a set of concentric circles of unity: at its centre the united front of the working-class movement, which in turn formed the basis of an even broader anti-fascist people’s front, which in turn provided in the relevant countries the base for a national front of all those determined to resist fascism [...], and finally — even more loosely — an international front of governments and peoples — including the USSR — against fascism and war. Each of these circles had, as it were, a different degree of unity’. However, the ILP did not agree, and it would not contemplate association with capitalist parties. George Orwell, briefly an ILP member in 1938, wrote: ‘The People’s Front is only an idea, but it has already produced the nauseous spectacle of bishops, Communists, cocoa magnates, publishers, duchesses, and Labour MPs marching arm in arm to the tune of “Rule Britannia”.’ Underlying the ILP attitude was the belief that fascism was the product of capitalist crisis and that any capitalist society was susceptible to it. Fascism was a desperate attempt by the ruling class to retain its power in societies that appeared to be disintegrating under severe economic depression. To eliminate fascism, socialism had to replace capitalism. For this reason only socialist parties should co-operate. The Popular Front strategy was based on the idea that fascism was a threat to democracy and that all democratic forces needed to combine in order to defeat it. Crucially, the idea that fascism was inherent to capitalism and could not be defeated without overthrowing it was jettisoned. The Communist Party’s support for the Popular Front, which necessitated class collaboration, allowed the ILP to criticize it from a left wing position. Eric Hobsbawm, ‘Fifty Years of People’s Fronts’, in Fyrth, *Britain, Fascism*, p. 240; Fenner Brockway, *The Worker’s Front* (1938); *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus, 1 (1968), 305.

Campaign', undertaken by the Communist Party and the Independent Labour Party. The third component of the 'Unity Campaign' was the Socialist League, a left-wing ginger group within the Labour Party. Its leader was Sir Stafford Cripps, a relatively recent recruit to the Labour Party who had been radicalized by the experience of economic slump in the early 1930s.

On 20 March 1938 Sydney Elliott, editor of the national Co-operative newspaper *Reynold's News*, launched the campaign for a 'United Peace Alliance' (yet another name for a Popular Front). It was a direct response to the German incorporation of Austria into the Reich. The *Liberal News Chronicle* stated its approval and the Co-operative Party conference passed a resolution supporting the proposal in April 1938. The Liberal leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, and three Liberal MPs had been favourable to the idea since 1936 and in May 1938 the Liberal Party backed the Popular Front. However, most of the Labour Party leadership opposed the Popular Front throughout the period and the campaign fizzled out by mid-1938. The campaign to promote the Popular Front policy inside the Labour Party came to a climax in early 1939, when Sir Stafford Cripps launched his 'Petition campaign.' This was crucial as Popular Fronters agreed that the Labour Party would have to lead any successful Popular Front government. Cripps's move came three months after the Munich agreement, which had induced a feeling of powerlessness in Labour Party ranks and prompted increasing calls for a Popular Front to combat the government more effectively.<sup>7</sup> Soon after Munich 'Popular Front' candidates did well at the Oxford and Bridgwater by-elections, which seemed to give the project new impetus.<sup>8</sup> Cripps's memorandum in January 1939 to the Labour Party's National Executive Committee (NEC) argued that the party would not be able to defeat the National Government at the next election unless it placed itself at the head of an electoral alliance of 'all opposition parties'.<sup>9</sup> The NEC rejected the idea. Undeterred, Cripps embarked on a national campaign in order to rally support and convince the NEC to change its mind. The party expelled him for this action.

Attitudes within the north-east labour movement were particularly important as Cripps launched his campaign to collect the signatures of Popular Front supporters at a public meeting in Newcastle on Sunday, 5 February 1939. Fortune played its part in this decision as Cripps requisitioned a pre-arranged *Tribune* (a Cripps-controlled periodical) rally in the town. However, Newcastle was in many regards an appropriate place to launch such a campaign.<sup>10</sup> It was the main city of a region characterized by a traditionally moderate and loyal labour movement that dominated in many localities. This was especially true of the coal producing areas of County Durham. There, Labour enjoyed hegemonic support amongst the working class. The higher turnout, collapse of the Liberal vote and middle classes voting Conservative, rather than a loss

<sup>7</sup> Roger Eatwell, 'The Labour Party and the Popular Front Movement in Britain in the 1930s' (unpub. D.Phil. thesis, Oxford Univ. 1975), p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> Vernon Bartlett took Bridgwater from the Conservatives on a 'progressive' anti-appeasement platform. See Roger Eatwell, 'Munich, Public Opinion, and Popular Front', *JCH*, 6:4 (1971), 122-39; Chris Cook and John Ramsden, *By Elections in British Politics* (1997), pp. 112-29.

<sup>9</sup> *Tribune*, 20 Jan. 1939, supplement. The supplement carries a copy of the full Cripps Memorandum. For documentation on the national Petition Campaign see Bodl(eian Library), Cripps Papers, SC-Box 13, files 507-512.

<sup>10</sup> *Tribune*, 3 Feb. 1939.

of working class support, explained Labour's loss of five Durham mining seats in the 1931 general election debacle.<sup>11</sup> The Durham Miner's Association (DMA), usually regarded as a moderate section of the Miners' Federation, effectively *was* the Labour Party in the coalfield.<sup>12</sup>

The North-East was precisely the kind of region that Cripps would need to win over if he was to have any success in changing labour movement policy. This article will examine in detail Cripps's Petition campaign in the North-East; the attitudes and actions of its supporters and opponents, its effects, successes and failures and their causes and consequences, comparing these with the less well documented 1938 United Peace Alliance campaign.<sup>13</sup> Consideration of these two Popular Front campaigns at grassroots level is itself of utility.<sup>14</sup> However, more importantly, the failure of the Popular Front campaigns in the North-East throws light on the political culture of the region; on the attitudes within parties and relations between political party activists at grassroots level during a tumultuous moment in twentieth-century British history.

### *Cripps's friends and enemies in the North*

*Tribune* deemed the inaugural 'Petition Campaign' meeting in Newcastle an 'amazing experience' that had seen 'as good a launching as ever had any ship'.<sup>15</sup> Even the

<sup>11</sup> J. Stevenson and C. Cook, *Britain in the Depression. Society and Politics, 1929–1939* (Harlow, 2nd edn, 1994) pp. 124–27. See also M. Callcott, 'Sidney Webb, Ramsay Macdonald, Emmanuel Shinwell and the Durham Constituency of Seaham', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 11 (1977), 13–27; M. Callcott, 'The Organization of Political Support for Labour in the North of England: the Work of Margaret Gibb', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 11 (1977), 47–58; M. Callcott, 'The Nature and Extent of Political Change in the Inter-war Years: the Example of County Durham', *Northern History*, xvi (1980), 215–37; M. H. Gibb and M. Callcott, 'The Labour Party in the North East Between the Wars', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 8 (1974), 9–19.

<sup>12</sup> Beynon and Austrin wrote that the Labour Party was 'very much established as the political arm of the trade union'. They regarded County Durham as the 'classic case' of the dominance of a moderate labour tradition; 'the centre of moderation and respectable Labour politics in Britain' where 'officialdom has reigned supreme within the working class'. Robert Moore claimed Methodism and nonconformism were largely responsible for the character of the DMA's trade unionism. Methodism emphasized thrift and accepted ownership of private property. Nonconformist beliefs were based on an acceptance of the market system: they encouraged deference to coal owners and placed faith in arbitration and conciliation rather than confrontation. The average Durham miner subscribed to an individualist philosophy that precluded a class view of society. Dave Douglass' *Pit Life in County Durham. Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control* (Oxford, 1972) considers the conflicts between militants and the predominantly moderate leadership. H. Beynon and T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organization. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (1994), pp. xvi, 340–41; and R. Moore, *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics* (Cambridge, 1974) passim.

<sup>13</sup> James Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931–1941* (1982), p. 119; Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause. British Communism, 1920–1991* (1992), pp. 42–64; John Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt. A Study in British Stalinism* (1993), p. 173; Fyrth, *Britain, Fascism*, pp. 15, 244–45; Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War. Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935–1941* (Manchester, 1989), pp. 45, 49, 51, 309; David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition* (Cambridge, 1992), passim.

<sup>14</sup> The 1939 'Petition Campaign' is a strangely neglected aspect of Cripps's political career despite the existence of numerous biographies and a generally favourable attitude to the strategy adopted by many historians of the left. Eric Estorick, *Stafford Cripps. A Biography* (1949); C. Cooke, *The Life of Richard Stafford Cripps* (1957); C. Bryant, *Stafford Cripps. The First Modern Chancellor* (1997); S. Burgess, *Stafford Cripps. A Political Life* (1999); Peter Clarke, *The Cripps Version: The Life of Sir Stafford Cripps, 1889–1952* (2002).

<sup>15</sup> *Tribune*, 10 Feb. 1939.

Conservative *Newcastle Journal* remarked on the meeting's 'amazing scenes of enthusiasm'.<sup>16</sup> Labour veteran Sir Charles Trevelyan was first to sign the petition. Trevelyan served in the first and second Labour governments at Education, providing the first Labour government with one of its most notable domestic achievements. His parliamentary career ended with electoral defeat in Newcastle Central constituency in 1931, but Trevelyan remained a well-respected Labour grandee.<sup>17</sup> Second to sign was Will Lawther, an official of the DMA. Lyall Wilkes, Arthur Blenkinsop (Labour prospective parliamentary candidates for Newcastle Central and Newcastle East respectively) and Sam Watson (another DMA official) all then added their names to the petition.<sup>18</sup>

This first problem for Cripps was that, although some were well known, all of these individuals were on the left of the Labour Party and therefore predictable Popular Front supporters. Trevelyan and Blenkinsop had supported the Popular Front 'United Peace Alliance' campaign in 1938.<sup>19</sup> Though there is no evidence of Lawther or Watson supporting the United Peace Alliance they were both on the Labour left and had actively supported the united front.<sup>20</sup> Oxford-educated Wilkes had only been Labour parliamentary candidate for Newcastle Central since January 1938 and was, at twenty-two, possibly the youngest prospective parliamentary candidate in England.<sup>21</sup> It is likely that Wilkes did not openly support the United Peace Alliance because he did not wish to jeopardize his standing within the Labour Party at such an early stage in his career.<sup>22</sup> These observations largely applied to other high-profile petition campaign supporters. County Councillor John Bell, who agitated for Cripps within Bishop Auckland constituency Labour Party, was a long-standing friend of Trevelyan who shared his views on the deteriorating international scene.<sup>23</sup> Blaydon left-wingers Henry Bolton, Steve Lawther and wife Emmie all acted in various ways to marshal support for Cripps.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 6 Feb. 1939. Though not supporting the campaign from a left wing perspective, perhaps the *Newcastle Journal* had as much reason as *Tribune* to exaggerate the success of the meeting as this would suggest that the splits within the labour movement over the Popular Front were considerable.

<sup>17</sup> A. J. A. Morriss, *C. P. Trevelyan: Portrait of a Radical* (Belfast, 1977).

<sup>18</sup> The first seven names on Cripps's petition were published in *Tribune*. The sixth and seventh names were those of Hyman Lee and Harry Brook. Lee was an important figure in the north-east Communist Party so his name was not surprising. Brook was a member of Newcastle East constituency Labour Party (Blenkinsop's party) and the Shop Assistants' Union. *Tribune*, 10 Feb. 1939.

<sup>19</sup> Blenkinsop and Wilkes were the only two north-east parliamentary candidates of a total of sixty-four mentioned in a presumed list of Cripps Labour parliamentary candidate supporters. A letter in April from Labour parliamentary candidates to the NEC pledging support for Cripps was signed by Wilkes and thirteen others, but not Blenkinsop. Bodl, Cripps Papers, SC-Box 13, file 508, List of Labour candidates for circulation', n.d.; file 511, Labour parliamentary candidate's letter to the NEC, 4 Apr. 1939.

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps they came to support Cripps through the pro-Popular Front Left Book Club. Watson was a member of Durham Left Book Club circle. *Durham Chronicle*, 11 Jun., 30 Jul. 1937; J. Lewis, *The Left Book Club. An Historical Record* (1970).

<sup>21</sup> *North Mail*, 10 May 1937; 15 Mar. 1938; *Newcastle Journal*, 26 Nov. 1936; *Durham Chronicle*, 18 Jan. 1938.

<sup>22</sup> This was suggested by Wilkes' involvement in the Left Book Club, but also his evident keenness not to anger his political superiors. In Sept. 1938, Wilkes was apparently prevented from chairing a Left Book Club rally in Newcastle with Gollancz and Communist leader Pollitt as speakers by an intervention from Transport House. Post-war, Wilkes was involved in 'Keep Left' (the Bevanite left wing group). *Gateshead Labour Herald*, Sept. 1938; Fenner Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow* (St Albans, 1977), p. 164.

<sup>23</sup> N(ewcastle University) R(obinson) L(ibrary), CPT150; CPT152, John Bell letters to C.P. Trevelyan, 18 Aug., 8 Oct. 1936; 14 Jan. 1937.

<sup>24</sup> *Tribune*, 17 Feb., 3 Mar. 1939; *North Mail*, 6 Mar. 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 12 Mar. 1939.

The second problem for Cripps was that the support provided by some of these key individuals was questionable. Will Lawther's attitude, for example, was distinctly lukewarm. He agreed to stop supporting Cripps when the NEC threatened him with expulsion from the Labour Party.<sup>25</sup> Support from Blenkinsop and Wilkes was important, but both of these were young men. The young are expected to be rebellious and can be afforded indulgences. The NEC did expel the veteran aristocrat Trevelyan for his actions. Though clearly dedicated, Trevelyan's flaw was ignorance of his own constituency Labour Party's attitude to the issue. He admitted having 'no conception what they are thinking in the rank-and-file' immediately before attending the Wansbeck constituency party meeting on the controversy.<sup>26</sup> This became evident when his pro-Cripps resolution was easily defeated at the constituency party's annual meeting, despite Trevelyan's own high standing in the party.<sup>27</sup>

Others, though pro-Popular Front, did not support Cripps's campaign at all. Willard Sexton (Hexham Labour parliamentary candidate) refused to sign a letter protesting at NEC threats to Popular Front supporters within the party. Sexton was 'still in favour of a Popular Front, but in my view it has been apparent for some time that there was not the slightest chance of carrying it at the Labour Party conference'.<sup>28</sup> Ellen Wilkinson, MP for Jarrow, argued for Cripps's plan on the Labour NEC, but she did not sign the petition and was not prepared to risk expulsion.<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson regretted the NEC decision to expel Cripps: 'I voted against it, but of course I remain loyal to the Socialist Party [*sic.*].'<sup>30</sup> Wilkinson could not 'possibly' act as a sponsor for Cripps's campaign as this would threaten the unity of the Labour Party.<sup>31</sup> This stance was consistent with her earlier loyalty to Labour and the NEC. Cripps also failed to convince some important left-wingers. For example, Jim Stephenson was absent from Blaydon Labour Party's activities on the issue in 1939. Stephenson had not supported the Popular Front in 1938 and Cripps's arguments had not changed his mind.<sup>32</sup>

The third major problem for Cripps was that most of the individuals who provided unstinting support represented no one other than themselves. Trevelyan got his local

<sup>25</sup> Lawther, along with C. L. Poole MP, provided a satisfactory reply to a letter from the NEC regarding support for Cripps's campaign that had been sent to seven important Labour Party members (also including Bevan and Trevelyan). Cooke claimed that of those who withdrew their support from Cripps in February Lawther was 'the most significant'. (Watson seems not to have been named in the letter), but he also pointed out that the vote to suspend standing orders and allow Cripps to speak at the 1939 Labour conference was 'due principally' to Lawther and the miners. *Shields Gazette*, 23 Mar. 1939; *North Mail*, 23 Mar. 1939; Cooke, *Life of Richard Stafford Cripps*, pp. 237–38.

<sup>26</sup> NRL, CPTEX133, C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 18 Mar. 1939.

<sup>27</sup> *Blyth News Ashington Post*, 20 Mar. 1939.

<sup>28</sup> Bodl, Cripps Papers, SC–Box 13, file 511, Sexton letter to Miss Hill, 11 Apr. 1939.

<sup>29</sup> Wilkinson voted for Pritt's resolution on the NEC to take no further action against Cripps. Despite not appearing on Cripps's platform, Wilkinson still spoke at a large Popular Front demonstration in London at the end of Feb. protesting against the recognition of Franco. Wilfred Roberts (Liberal MP, Cumberland North) was present in an unofficial capacity collecting signatures for Cripps's Petition. At the Newcastle Petition campaign meeting, Cripps paid tribute to Wilkinson's 'sincerity' and said that, in staying away, 'she had acted in the way she considered best in the interests of the working-classes'. NEC Minutes, 22 Mar. 1939; *Shields Gazette*, 19, 23 Jan., 1, 4, 23 Feb. 1939; *Newcastle Journal*, 23 Jan., 6 Feb. 1939; *North Mail*, 23 Jan., 27 Feb., 11 Apr. 1939; Eatwell, thesis, p. 351.

<sup>30</sup> *North Mail*, 26 Jan. 1939.

<sup>31</sup> *Shields Evening News*, 3 Feb. 1939.

<sup>32</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 112–13, 164–65, 185.

Labour Party to submit a resolution condemning Cripps's expulsion from the Labour Party for 'advocating a strategy which at least to a very large section of the party members seems to be the wisest' to a meeting of Wansbeck constituency Labour Party. However, the constituency party itself rejected the resolution by 111 against to only thirty-seven for.<sup>33</sup> It continued to oppose the Popular Front even after Trevelyan's expulsion from the Labour Party over the issue.<sup>34</sup> Likewise, Lawther and Watson received no official DMA support. The other DMA officials either remained silent on the issue or supported the NEC, and there was no lodge vote on either Cripps or the Popular Front.<sup>35</sup> A large majority of Newcastle City Labour Party endorsed Cripps's expulsion and Blenkinsop's constituency Labour Party, Newcastle East, followed suit at its annual meeting, with only four delegates defiant.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Bishop Auckland constituency Labour Party was so hostile to Cripps supporters in its ranks that it expelled Bell and M. Walton, a second Cripps supporter.<sup>37</sup> Of the first petition signatories, only Wilkes received backing from his constituency Labour Party, Newcastle Central, which also sent two messages of support for Cripps in February.<sup>38</sup> This was particularly significant as Newcastle Central was the only constituency Labour Party in the North-East to support Cripps unequivocally.

<sup>33</sup> Each parliamentary constituency had a Constituency Labour Party with a membership that could be active in all or some of three distinct levels of organization within the constituency: in ward Labour Parties (the lowest level), in local or town Labour Party branches (an intermediary level; 'town' here is used to distinguish between constituency and local Labour parties that have the same name, e.g. Jarrow, Gateshead, or South Shields) or at constituency level itself. Constituency Labour Parties were in turn organized into regional federations. There were two of these in the North-East, Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties and Durham County Federation of Labour Parties. Each trade union had branches and a central organization for the north-east region, normally based in Newcastle. Trades councils organized branches of all trade unions in several larger localities and acted as local Trade Union Congresses. In some of the larger towns they acted as combined organizations with the local Labour Party (for examples, Jarrow, South Shields and Gateshead, but not in Newcastle or Blaydon). Trades councils organized regionally by affiliating to the North-East Federation of Trades Councils. There was also a national organization of trades councils that held annual conferences.

<sup>34</sup> N(orthumberland) R(ecord) O(ffice), 527/A/3, Wansbeck constituency Labour Party Minutes, 6 May, 8 Jul. 1939; *North Mail*, 1 Apr. 1939; 6 May 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 19 Mar. 1939.

<sup>35</sup> The *DMA Monthly Journal* reproduced the cases for the NEC and Cripps in February and March 1939. Gateshead Public Library, L622.33, *DMA Monthly Journal*, no.12, Mar. 1939; *North Mail*, 9 Feb. 1939. Eatwell was thus mistaken in interpreting the miners' choice of both Cripps and Bevan as guest speakers at the DMA gala in July 1939 (receiving the largest and second largest number of votes from the lodges, respectively), as indicating official DMA support for the Popular Front. It could, of course, indicate rank-and-file support, but the small number of DMA lodges that openly advocated Cripps's plan suggests otherwise. As with Cripps's election as DMA gala speaker in 1937, this did not necessarily indicate support for his political stance. Eatwell, thesis, p. 326; Mates, thesis, pp. 150–51.

<sup>36</sup> *North Mail*, 15, 17 Feb. 1939.

<sup>37</sup> This was despite the fact that the local Labour Party had, in mid-April, decided that all constituency Labour Party delegates should vote to take no action on Cripps or the Popular Front until Labour conference. Walton was 'heartily' thanked by the meeting for his 'splendid work' for the party. D(urham) R(ecord) O(ffice), D/BAL/1/2, Bishop Auckland Minutes local Labour Party, 13, 27 Apr. 1939.

<sup>38</sup> In early April Wilkes was one of fourteen Labour parliamentary candidates who wrote to the NEC protesting against the attempt to stifle discussion in the Labour Party and expressing their determination to continue supporting Cripps's campaign. Later that month, Wilkes put his name to another letter, signed by seventeen parliamentary candidates, protesting at Labour's attitude to Cripps and reaffirming their intention to keep supporting the Popular Front. *Tribune*, 10, 24 Feb., 6 Apr. 1939; *North Mail*, 27 Feb., 6 Apr. 1939; *Daily Worker* (final edition), 29 Apr. 1939.



However, Cripps's campaign did draw organizational support from some smaller sections of the north-east labour movement.<sup>39</sup> The degree of success that their support for the Popular Front represented can be ranked into three levels. The first level is of parties and union organizations (normally branches) that were left-wing dominated and therefore predictable Popular Front supporters. Their support thus represented the least significant successes. Stanley local party, in which Bart Kelly, a United Peace Alliance supporter, played a leading role, can be ranked at this level. Other parties at this level were Blaydon (Steve Lawther and Henry Bolton's party), Jarrow and South Shields (all town rather than constituency Labour Parties). They all supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938, in areas where Labour was strong. In Newcastle Central constituency Labour was weaker, but in the thrall of young left-winger Wilkes. On the industrial side, the five DMA lodges openly supporting Cripps had all been involved in left-wing causes such as the Hunger March, supporting Communist affiliation to Labour or the united front 'Unity Campaign'. Newcastle trades council was also involved in all left-wing activity in this period.<sup>40</sup>

The second level comprises organizations that were not notably left-wing from areas where Labour was weak, such as in parts of Northumberland. Tynemouth Labour Party's support for Cripps was important as relations with the local Communist Party had been poor and the party had not previously supported the Popular

<sup>39</sup> North-East Labour movement organizations that either left evidence of their endorsement of the Cripps Petition Campaign or expressed disquiet at Cripps's treatment by the NEC were: Blaydon and Winlaton (including women's section), Birtley, Blyth, Cambo, Cleadon, Dunston, Ellington, Hebburn, Jarrow, Morpeth, Newburn, Primrose and Monkton including women's section, Shiney Row, Shotton, South Hylton, South Shields, Stanley, Tynemouth and Willington Quay local, ward and town Labour Parties and Newcastle Central constituency Labour Party. On the industrial side, support came from Blyth and Newcastle trades councils, Newcastle No.13 Amalgamated Engineering Union branch (with a 500 membership), Heaton and Newcastle Locomotive Engineers and Firemen branches (Newcastle branch had defended Cripps from the NEC in 1936), Gateshead No. 1 Railwaymen branch, Woodhorn branch of the Northumberland Colliery Mechanics Association (NCMA), Stanley (with a membership of 180) and Shotton branches Municipal Workers (NUGMW) and five DMA lodges (of these, Randolph, Spen and Chopwell lodges clearly supported Cripps whilst Ravensworth and Hetton's stances merely implied support). Hexham constituency Labour Party has not been included in this list as it is clear that it was anti-Popular Front. Its 1939 annual meeting voted against a resolution supporting the Popular Front policy, though the same meeting then passed a resolution calling on the NEC to reinstate Cripps. W(arwick) M(odern) R(ecords) C(entre), 259/1/2/74, Amalgamated Engineering Union Executive Minutes, 22 Feb. 1939; NRO, 5021/A4/2, NCMA Executive Minutes, 15 Mar. 1939; L(about) H(istory) S(tudy) (and) A(rchive) C(entre), M(anchester), LP/SO-CIALIST LEAGUE/35/26, J.G. Baty letter to Middleton, 14 Dec. 1936; D(urham) M(iners') O(ffices) R(edhill), DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 1 Apr. 1939; DMOR, DMA Executive Minutes, 13, 20 Feb. 1939; Bodl, Cripps Papers, SC-Box 13, file 511, Sexton letter to Miss Hill, 11 Apr. 1939; *Blaydon Courier*, 17 Feb. 1939; *Tribune*, 10, 24 Feb. 1939; *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 10 Mar. 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 12, 26 Mar. 1939; *Sunderland Echo*, 13 Mar. 1939.

<sup>40</sup> Randolph lodge, Evenwood, was chaired by Bell, a friend of Trevelyan and Popular Front supporter. South Shields town Labour Party received a copy of a letter from their MP, Chuter Ede, to the national Labour Party secretary, Middleton, expressing his amazement at the expulsion. The party then overwhelmingly passed (by twenty-seven votes to two) a resolution protesting at the 'hasty' expulsion, condemning the 'attempt to stifle discussion within the party' and demanding a hearing for Cripps at conference. It also sent a message of support to *Tribune*. In April 1939 it passed a resolution 'inviting' the NEC to bring all the prominent expelled Cripps supporters back into the party. Almost as soon as the controversy had broken, the secretary of West ward of Jarrow town Labour Party sent his 'best wishes' to Cripps. A Jarrow town Labour Party special meeting called to consider Cripps's expulsion passed a resolution urging his re-admission (sixty-three votes to four in favour). Regardless of their MP Ellen Wilkinson's attitude, Jarrow town Labour Party (and its ward party in Primrose and Monkton ward) sent messages of support for Cripps to *Tribune* throughout February. S(outh) S(hields) P(ublic) L(ibrary), LPM6, South Shields town Labour Party Minutes, 31 Jan., 11 Apr. 1939; *Shields Gazette*, 3 Feb., 12 Apr. 1939; *Tribune*, 20 Jan., 10, 24 Feb. 1939; *North Mail*, 27 Jan., 7 Feb. 1939; Mates, thesis, pp. 22–64, 109–91.

Front.<sup>41</sup> The same went for Morpeth Labour Party's support for the petition campaign. In 1936, Morpeth constituency Labour Party voted against supporting Communist Party affiliation to Labour (albeit narrowly).<sup>42</sup> Both Morpeth and Tynemouth parties operated in strongly Conservative areas, so they potentially stood to gain directly from a progressive alliance. However, their support for the Popular Front was less predictable than that of the left-dominated parties discussed above and therefore more of a success when it came.<sup>43</sup>

A third group of parties that neither of the previous two conditions applied to represented the most significant gains for Cripps. The main example of this group was Blyth Labour Party, where Labour was dominant in local politics and not notably left-wing. Indeed, relations between the Communist Party and the Labour Party in Blyth were strained well before 1939, with open clashes between members of the two parties over the 1936 Hunger March and the day-to-day unemployed campaigns.<sup>44</sup> A second example came in a section of Wansbeck constituency Labour Party. In February 1937 a meeting of Newburn local Labour Party narrowly defeated a resolution critical of the NEC's attack on the Socialist League, a left-wing ginger group, and against 'heresy hunting' within the party.<sup>45</sup> In 1939 Newburn local Labour Party supported Cripps. However, as these are the only two examples that can be cited with certainty, this is a reflection of the lack of success Cripps's campaign achieved in the region. Overall, Cripps secured support from most of the regional left-wing plus a handful of other parties. It was nowhere near the level of support required even to challenge the power of the union block votes at Labour's party conference.

An important qualification here is that it is not always clear from the evidence that these organizations actually *supported* the Popular Front. A message of support for Cripps or condemnation of the NEC did not necessarily indicate agreement with Cripps's memorandum. For example, South Shields Labour MP Chuter Ede's support for Cripps extended only as far as defending him from his treatment by the NEC, rather than actually endorsing his proposals. There is no evidence that Ede had changed his mind on the Popular Front since negative comments he made on an Ellen Wilkinson Popular Front memorandum in late 1938.<sup>46</sup> More constituency Labour Parties expressed their opposition to the NEC's *treatment* of Cripps than support for his plans. With many of the north-east organizations discussed above, it is impossible to determine whether they supported Cripps's case for a Popular Front or were merely supporting his *right to argue his case* against an anti-democratic and

<sup>41</sup> That Tynemouth trades council did not support Cripps was perhaps due to the chairholder, Ovington's, opposition to Communism. *Shields Evening News*, 28, 30 Jan., 2, 6 Feb. 1939; *Shields Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1939; *North Mail*, 30 Jan., 7 Feb. 1939; *Tribune*, 24 Feb. 1939; Mates, thesis, pp. 31–33, 40–41.

<sup>42</sup> In early April, Morpeth Labour Party 'strongly condemned' the NEC for expelling Cripps. Morpeth constituency was Labour-held and contained the labour movement stronghold of Blyth, but Labour only won its first seat on Morpeth council in 1939. *North Mail*, 1 Apr. 1939; Mates, thesis, p. 24.

<sup>43</sup> Particularly so in Morpeth, where, according to Communist William Allan, Labour organizer Mr. N. Garrow wanted to expel Cripps even before the NEC had pronounced on the issue. *Blyth News Ashington Post*, 30 Mar. 1939.

<sup>44</sup> Blyth trades council, which also supported Cripps, had been less hostile to the Communist Party pre-1939. *Sunday Sun*, 12 Mar. 1939; *Tribune*, 10, 24 Feb. 1939; Mates, thesis, pp. 28–31, 39–44, 53–54, 123–27, 134–35, 162–63.

<sup>45</sup> The resolution was defeated eleven votes to seven. NRO, 527/B/3, Newburn and District local Labour Party Minutes, 10 Feb. 1937.

<sup>46</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 172–73.

oppressive NEC. Given the relative tolerance of the north-east labour movement, it is very likely that many organizations mentioned above fell into this latter category.

Moreover, set against these successes were the organizations that would have been expected to support Cripps, but which did not. Whilst important individuals in Blaydon Labour Party supported Cripps's campaign, it is unlikely Blaydon constituency Labour Party as a whole did, which was significant as it had supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938.<sup>47</sup> South Shields constituency Labour Party also did not support Cripps and neither did Jarrow constituency Labour Party, despite significant sections of both parties backing him.<sup>48</sup> The campaign's most important failures were Newcastle North and Newcastle East constituency Labour Parties. Both had supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938, but in 1939 they openly opposed Cripps. Gateshead town Labour Party, which had supported the united front Unity Campaign in 1937, but not the Popular Front in 1938, was very quiet on the issue. Contrary to Ferguson's claim, it was not clearly 'in favour of the idea of a Popular Front'.<sup>49</sup>

Another damaging measure of the non-support for Cripps is evident in those who were billed to speak at the 'Tribune Rally' in Newcastle on 5 February, but who then pulled out when Cripps changed the meeting's remit. The main example was Ellen Wilkinson, but other billed speakers who withdrew included David Adams (Labour MP for Consett), Jack Bowman (an Engineering Union regional official), William Maclean (Wansbeck Labour Party parliamentary candidate) and R. E. Butchart (of the Shop Assistants' Union).<sup>50</sup> Before the meeting, *Tribune* boasted that 'Practically the whole of the local labour movement will thus be represented at this great meeting'.<sup>51</sup> In the event, much of the local labour movement was, in fact, not represented. Support from David Adams would have been a notable coup, had it been forthcoming. The only Catholic Labour MP in the region, Adams nevertheless openly supported the Spanish Republican cause.<sup>52</sup> Yet he and these other key individuals had shown their opposition to the Popular Front by pulling out of the pre-planned *Tribune* meeting.

Still, the 5 February launch meeting attracted an impressive audience of 3500 with 1000 turned away.<sup>53</sup> Flushed with success, Trevelyan claimed that the meeting had

<sup>47</sup> There is no evidence of the attitude of the Labour MP for the constituency, William Whitely. Perhaps he was just keeping a low profile. Blaydon town Labour Party certainly supported Cripps, as it sent two messages of support to *Tribune*. *Tribune*, 10, 24 Feb. 1939.

<sup>48</sup> Jarrow constituency Labour Party initially announced itself content with its MP's position and that it would take no action against Wilkinson. It deemed a special meeting on the subject unnecessary. The Jarrow constituency Labour Party annual meeting approved a resolution urging support for the NEC's attitude to the Popular Front. *Shields Gazette*, 20 Mar. 1939.

<sup>49</sup> S. Ferguson, 'Labour Party Politics, 1939–45. A Case Study of Konni Zilliacus and the Gateshead Labour Party and Trades Council' (Gateshead Library, 1988), pp. 13, 47–49. Ferguson argued that Gateshead constituency Labour Party's choice of Konni Zilliacus as its parliamentary candidate proved that the party was pro-Popular Front. Indeed, Zilliacus' predecessor, Bart Kelly, supported the United Peace Alliance conference in May 1938, although no other important Gateshead Labour Party figures did, and all were very quiet on the issue in 1939. One pro-Cripps piece was all that was produced in the *Gateshead Labour Herald*. The evidence is inconclusive, but more evidence of support for the Popular Front than the fact Zilliacus was elected parliamentary candidate is required. *Gateshead Labour Herald*, Feb. 1939.

<sup>50</sup> *Shields Gazette*, 4 Feb. 1939; *Times*, 4 Feb. 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 5 Feb. 1939.

<sup>51</sup> *Tribune*, 3 Feb. 1939.

<sup>52</sup> Maclean had always opposed the Popular Front. See below. Mates, thesis, pp. 93–94.

<sup>53</sup> *The Newcastle Journal*, 6 Feb. 1939, put the figure at 3,000 plus.

been the biggest in fifteen years in Newcastle. He wrote to his wife: 'Quite possibly it [the Cripps Petition] may be a success to judge by its instantaneous reception at Newcastle. Fancy £91 being subscribed in 15 minutes for the fund for running it!'<sup>54</sup> Trevelyan was exaggerating: the first Unity Campaign meeting in Newcastle only two years earlier had mobilized 5000 people and raised only £8 less.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the Unity Campaign initiated in the region by this earlier equally substantial meeting had no palpable positive effects. Eatwell was thus rightly critical of Cripps's over-estimation of the political impact of mass meetings.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, as the meeting had been planned before the Cripps controversy had erupted, it is likely that, like the speakers who were originally billed but did not speak, many in the audience did not support the Popular Front.

Similar observations regarding the size of public meetings not necessarily equating to support are also applicable to a Cripps meeting at Bishop Auckland in late March 1939. With an attendance of 600, it was the largest meeting the town had seen for years. Yet, just over a sixth (110) signed the petition, which was, curiously, even fewer than the 115 who had volunteered to help collect signatures.<sup>57</sup> Cripps meetings at North Shields (with an audience of 350) and West Stanley (600) were also impressive in terms of size. Yet a public meeting featuring a politician as well-known as Cripps was always likely to attract large audiences in places that were normally overlooked by national political figures, out of curiosity if nothing else.<sup>58</sup>

The poor response to a conference organized to marshal regional support for the Petition campaign in Gateshead in mid-March 1939 was symbolic of its failure. There were only 160 people representing fifty political parties, trade union branches, miners' lodges and co-operative bodies present at the conference. This was less than 4 per cent of the 1400 organizations that had been invited.<sup>59</sup> The support of around fifty 'progressive organizations' in the whole of the North-East was hardly a ringing endorsement for the Popular Front in 1939. In fact, this Petition conference was around half the size of a United Peace Alliance conference held in the region ten months earlier and even this could not be regarded as well supported.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> NRL, CPTEX133, C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 6 Feb. 1939.

<sup>55</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 22 Mar. 1937; *New Leader*, 26 Mar. 1937. In fact, the way in which a large amount of the money was raised suggests that Cripps benefited from a handful of relatively wealthy benefactors rather than from the pennies of working-class supporters. Trevelyan was the first to donate, and placed £10 on the chairman's table. Members of the audience in the front rows and those on the platform then threw several £5 notes onto the table and an 'avalanche of half crowns' followed. In fact, more than two-thirds of the total donated (£64 9s. 6d. of the £91) was raised in this way before the collecting tin was passed around the audience. Trevelyan's single donation amounted to more than the difference in money raised between this and the Unity Campaign meetings; even then the total collected was not massive. The north-east International Brigade memorial meeting, which occurred two weeks before, raised £142 13s. 6d. Trevelyan was not noted as having attended the first Unity Campaign demonstration, so he may have been ignorant of the turnout and the amount raised. He was, however, at the International Brigade meeting and must have known that it raised over £50 more. *Newcastle Journal*, 16 Jan., 6 Feb. 1939.

<sup>56</sup> Eatwell, thesis, p. 358; Mates, thesis, pp. 109–59.

<sup>57</sup> *Tribune*, 6 Apr. 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 26 Mar. 1939.

<sup>58</sup> *Tribune*, 10 Feb. 1939; WMRC, 292/743/2, George Rumney (West Stanley Communist Party branch secretary) letter to the TUC, 4 Apr. 1939.

<sup>59</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 12 Mar. 1939.

<sup>60</sup> Any trade union branch or local or ward political party branch was deemed a 'progressive organization'. Thus, the DMA alone consisted of around 175 'progressive organizations' as it had that number of affiliated lodges in this period.

In terms of the level of agitation, too, the north-east Petition campaign was unsuccessful. The Gateshead Town Hall conference in mid-March was the only regional level meeting held to organize practical campaigning.<sup>61</sup> In fact, most of the debates occurred in specially called meetings of ‘official’ labour movement organizations held to discuss the issue.<sup>62</sup> The Durham County Federation of Labour Parties and Durham County Labour Women’s Sections, for examples, held meetings to discuss the issue.<sup>63</sup> These meetings invariably defeated Cripps’s proposals. The Petition campaign clearly provoked a lot more hostility than support in the North-East. Only six of the 221 delegates at the Durham County Labour Women’s Sections emergency conference on the issue voted in favour of Cripps.<sup>64</sup> Other official organizations pronouncing against Cripps and in favour of the NEC in the region included the Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties, Newcastle City Labour Party (comprising the four city constituency Labour Parties), Northumberland Labour Women’s Advisory Council and Bishop Auckland, Jarrow, Wansbeck, Newcastle East and Houghton-le-Spring constituency Labour Parties.<sup>65</sup> They were joined by Durham constituency Labour Party when it endorsed Cripps’s expulsion (by seventy-one votes to twelve) in mid-February. The same party had supported Communist Party affiliation to Labour in 1936.<sup>66</sup> Seaham MP Manny Shinwell attacked Cripps’s supporters, asking if they ‘realised the damage they were doing to the working-class cause’.<sup>67</sup> On the industrial side of the movement, Councillor J. Middleton, president of the General and Municipal Workers’ Northern District Council, condemned Cripps’s ‘farcical’ movement, which he thought was doomed, like other ‘rebel causes’, to ‘meet an early death’.<sup>68</sup> The Northumberland Colliery Mechanics mandated its delegates to support the NEC and several other branches of various trade unions passed resolutions supporting Cripps’s expulsion.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>61</sup> The conference formed a regional committee to distribute petitions and organize house-to-house canvassing. This committee presumably came to form the North-East District Petition Campaign committee with an area office in Newcastle. There were twelve regional committees in total. *Tribune*, 3 Mar. 1939; *Sunday Sun*, 12 Mar. 1939; Eatwell, thesis, p. 336.

<sup>62</sup> A Petition Campaign meeting planned for Jarrow was abandoned owing to the weather. *North Mail*, 17 May 1939. Eden Lodge minutes, which recorded in some detail the nature of circulars received, suggests that the only two conferences were organized to support Cripps’s memorandum in the region (at Gateshead and Stanley). In March the lodge received circulars regarding these two conferences, but no others were mentioned. ‘Official’ labour movement refers to the Labour Party and trade unions, but not the Communist Party. DRO, D/DMA/334/12, *Eden Lodge Minutes*, 9 Mar. 1939.

<sup>63</sup> *Tribune*, 17 Feb. 1939.

<sup>64</sup> The 221 delegates represented 113 Durham County Labour Women’s Sections with a total membership of 3754. *North Mail*, 6 Mar. 1939.

<sup>65</sup> *North Mail*, 20 Feb., 7, 27 Mar., 3 Apr. 1939.

<sup>66</sup> However, it was decided to await the Labour conference decision on Cripps before any action would be taken. DRO, D/SHO/93/2, Durham constituency Labour Party Minutes, 18 Feb., 13 May 1939.

<sup>67</sup> *North Mail*, 30 Jan. 1939.

<sup>68</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 26 Feb. 1939; *North Mail*, 27 Feb. 1939.

<sup>69</sup> The NCMA executive had received a pro-Cripps resolution from its Woodhorn branch, against which it strongly reacted. Following Middleton’s lead, Houghton-le-Spring and district NUGMW passed a resolution supporting the NEC in expelling Cripps and at least five DMA lodges (Murton, West Thornley, Trimdon Grange, Houghton-le-Spring and Eden) appeared to be opposed to Cripps. NRO, 5021/A4/2, NCMA Executive Minutes, 15 Mar. 1939; DMOR, DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 1 Apr. 1939; DMA Executive Minutes, 13, 20 Feb. 1939; DRO, D/DMA/334/12, *Eden Lodge Minutes*, 9 Mar. 1939; *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 10 Mar. 1939.

The final measure of failure was that even in the few localities where Petition campaign machinery appeared to be working and gaining a degree of popular local support, it was incapable of exerting any influence on the power-brokers in the local labour movement. This influence was imperative if the policy was to emerge victorious at the national Labour Party annual conference. At Bishop Auckland, the 115 recruited as campaign supporters managed to collect nearly 1,000 signatures for the Petition within two weeks, and more were still coming in. Yet this impressive figure had no obvious effect on the district labour movement. Indeed, Bishop Auckland constituency Labour Party expelled two of its members for supporting Cripps, and the locality's Petition campaign subsequently disintegrated. A thousand plus signatures meant nothing to labour movement officials in the area.<sup>70</sup>

### *Reasons for failure: the labour movement*

Unlike the United Peace Alliance campaign of the previous year, Cripps's campaign had a definite organizing centre and a figurehead.<sup>71</sup> It also sparked more controversy in the North-East than did the United Peace Alliance, but it was still defeated with an almost 10-1 vote against at the Labour national annual conference in late May 1939.<sup>72</sup> Historians have judged harshly Cripps's conduct of the Petition campaign, and this clearly offers part of the explanation for its failure. First, the flaws in Cripps's Popular Front memorandum have been highlighted. Though adopting a largely positive approach to the Popular Front idea, Eatwell still argued that Cripps's memorandum was understated, poorly researched and sloppily presented.<sup>73</sup> G. D. H. Cole, who supported the Popular Front at the time, did not approve of the memorandum either. Cole thought that Cripps weakened the Popular Front's case as he argued for it solely on the terms of the Labour leadership, depicting it as an electoral strategy rather than as a device for immediately mobilizing public opinion against government foreign policy. This allowed the NEC to retort that Cripps was 'surrendering socialism'. Moreover, Labour accused Cripps in 1939 'not without justice, of having radically changed his line', a point later echoed by Ralph Miliband.<sup>74</sup> Cripps's opposition to rearmament also caused problems. He had no answer to those who wondered what would be used to back up the anti-appeasement foreign policy of a Popular Front government.<sup>75</sup> Chris Bryant highlighted the confusion in Cripps's own mind over exactly who was to be included in a Popular Front.<sup>76</sup>

Eatwell also criticized Cripps's tactics, citing his refusal both to consult some left-wingers before embarking on the campaign (such as Ellen Wilkinson) and to listen to those he did consult (such as Shinwell). Cripps's choice to remain on the NEC whilst

<sup>70</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 9 Apr. 1939.

<sup>71</sup> G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party From 1914* (New York, 1969), p. 353; Jupp, *Radical Left*, p. 114.

<sup>72</sup> *North Mail*, 30, 31 May, 2, 12 Jun. 1939.

<sup>73</sup> Eatwell, thesis, pp. 308–37.

<sup>74</sup> Cole, *Labour Party*, p. 358; R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (1972), pp. 256–67.

<sup>75</sup> Cole, *Labour Party*, p. 359.

<sup>76</sup> Bryant, *Stafford Cripps*, pp. 168–69.

attacking it was also wrong-headed. Cripps played into the hands of the Labour leadership as he focused the campaign on himself. This allowed his opponents to depict him as another Mosley with ease.<sup>77</sup> Bryant seemed unsure of the efficacy of Cripps's tactics. He approved of Cripps sending his memorandum to constituency Labour Parties as he 'stole a march' on the NEC, but this was ineffective as, in doing this, Cripps alienated the NEC. In fact, this action gave the NEC an excuse to punish him 'not for what he said, but for how he had gone about saying it'.<sup>78</sup> Most agree that Cripps's speech at Labour conference, in which he concentrated on why he should have been allowed to behave as he had, rather than arguing the case for the Popular Front, was another tactical error.<sup>79</sup> The tactic of collecting signatures was also flawed. It required a lot of work and was ineffective. As noted above, even large numbers of signatures collected appeared to have no positive impact.<sup>80</sup> On top of this was Cripps's insensitivity. Mervyn Jones has described a line from Cripps's account of his ten week holiday in Jamaica in *Tribune* as 'perhaps the most tactless sentence ever to appear in a left-wing paper'.<sup>81</sup> Raymond Challinor has also criticized Cripps's personal conduct.<sup>82</sup> Those opposing Cripps in the North-East certainly employed many of these arguments, especially the claim that Cripps's wealth allowed him to pursue a campaign that most in the party would not be able to afford.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to these problems were the weaknesses in Cripps's organization. Eatwell has argued that Cripps's petition organization was under-funded, badly organized and inefficient. Whilst there were 321 local Petition Committees by the end of April 1939 and 450 in two-thirds of all constituencies in Britain by mid-May, many of these were nominal and a third were concentrated in London.<sup>84</sup> These organizational weaknesses were reflected in the North-East. Though the number of Petition Committees in the region is uncertain, evidence exists for at least four, in Bishop Auckland, Newcastle, Durham and South Shields. It is conceivable that these were the only four in the region: there were only seven in the whole of South Wales, a region that, owing to the relative domination of the Communist Party, provided far more support for the Popular Front than the North-East.<sup>85</sup> Yet, as has been seen, Cripps's organization seems to have functioned relatively well in Bishop Auckland.

<sup>77</sup> Burgess echoed Eatwell's criticisms. Eatwell, thesis, pp. 308–37; Burgess, *Stafford Cripps*, pp. 119–29.

<sup>78</sup> Bryant, *Stafford Cripps*, p. 171.

<sup>79</sup> For examples, Cole, *Labour Party*, p. 359 and Bryant, *Stafford Cripps*, p. 181. However, Cooke thought Cripps's choice of subject matter was wise. Cooke also praised Cripps for the work he put into the campaign. Cooke, *Life of Richard Stafford Cripps*, pp. 231–38.

<sup>80</sup> Even if constituency Labour Parties had been won over in significant numbers, there remained the problem of forcing the NEC to act. Despite massive labour movement support for a national conference in 1938, the NEC refused to act and there seemed to be little local labour movement organizations could do. They could, of course, disaffiliate in protest and enter the political wilderness as the ILP had done in 1931. However, this would have been a very drastic 'solution' and very unlikely to happen as these constituency Labour Parties generally did not have the ideological problems with the NEC that the ILP had had. Despite the fact that more constituency representatives had been allowed on the NEC from 1937, it is remarkable how little practical control the constituency parties still had over the national party leadership. It was even more remarkable that they put up with this situation. That they did was a testament to their strong loyalty to the movement. Mates, thesis, pp. 184–86.

<sup>81</sup> M. Jones, *Michael Foot* (1995), p. 66.

<sup>82</sup> R. Challinor, *The Struggle for Hearts and Minds* (Whitley Bay, 1995), p. 43.

<sup>83</sup> A file in the Cripps papers contains several begging letters from Cripps to wealthy friends. Bodl, Cripps Papers, SC–Box 13, file 508.

<sup>84</sup> Eatwell, thesis, pp. 358–60.

<sup>85</sup> *Tribune*, 28 Apr., 12 May 1939.

However, it would be wrong to attribute too much importance to these particular factors. By laying the blame for failure of the Popular Front in 1939 at Cripps's feet, the implication is that the project could have been successful, had it not been for Cripps. This was not the case. The failure of Cripps's campaign in the North-East can be attributed to the same wider factors that ensured that the United Peace Alliance did not receive significant north-east labour movement support in 1938. Indeed, Cripps failed even to mobilize the support that the United Peace Alliance managed in May 1938. This, arguably, may have had something to do with Cripps's particular programme and a way of behaving which alienated some in the region. This is unlikely, however, as Cripps was popular enough for the DMA to vote him as a speaker at its gala in 1939. The timing of Cripps's campaign was crucial. Previously supportive, the Co-operative Party and Liberals were either opposed to the Popular Front or lukewarm by spring 1939. There was also a rift between Liberals and Labour over conscription in early 1939, with Labour opposed and the Liberals in favour. In addition, Eatwell has claimed that a decrease in public interest in foreign affairs in spring 1939 meant that the Petition campaign came too late to capitalize on the aftermath of Munich. The anger felt by some at the Munich 'betrayal' had become confusion and apathy. In fact, the increased resolution of the government on foreign policy and its apparent distancing of itself from appeasement after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia led to an increase in its popularity by April 1939.<sup>86</sup> The timing of events in Spain was also potentially important. The primary purpose of the Popular Front, argued Michael Foot, was to save 'Spain'. When Franco marched into Madrid in March 1939, 'there was no longer a Spain to save'.<sup>87</sup> The fall of the Spanish Republic must have dissipated some of the Petition campaign's impetus, though, for reasons discussed below, this effect was minimal.

Ultimately, the Cripps campaign failed for the underlying reasons that the United Peace Alliance had not gathered significant support in the region the previous year. A key consideration was loyalty. A national party statement, *The Labour Party and the Popular Front*, ended with the claim that the success of a political party depended on the loyalty and staying power of its members, and this had a strong resonance in the region.<sup>88</sup> The north-east labour movement was particularly noted for its loyalty, and it did not appear to falter in the late 1930s. In early May 1938, the Durham County Federation of Labour Parties (DCFLP) unanimously accepted the NEC's report that the Labour Party should not associate with political bodies that did not share its policy (i.e. Liberals and Communists in a Popular Front). 'However desirable, the expressed objects [of the Popular Front] can best be pursued within the ranks of our Party, as apart from the elementary principle of loyalty, the diffusion of effort and finance involved must inevitably weaken our organization', the DCFLP told its affiliates.<sup>89</sup> These considerations were paramount in informing the attitudes of regional labour movement leaders.

<sup>86</sup> Eatwell, thesis, pp. 364–68. James Hinton argued that Chamberlain's apparent abandonment of appeasement in spring 1939 was 'a victory of sorts' for the Popular Front agitation as it had as much to do with fear of a Conservative rebellion as any genuine rethinking of foreign policy. J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism. A History of the British Labour Movement, 1867–1974* (Brighton, 1983), p. 160.

<sup>87</sup> Foot, *Bevan*, p. 296.

<sup>88</sup> *The Labour Party and the Popular Front* (Labour Party Publication, 1938), p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> *North Mail*, 4 May 1938.



The lack of official DMA support for Cripps's campaign and the earlier United Peace Alliance was crucial to their failures. In spring 1938, the union demonstrated its loyalty to Labour by overwhelmingly supporting an executive proposal to make a donation of £5,000 to the party (the lodge vote was 843:35 in favour). This was claimed to be the largest single contribution to the party by any one labour movement body.<sup>90</sup> Nothing occurred in 1938 or 1939 that shook the firm belief within the DMA that Labour alone was capable of righting the deteriorating situation. What was this loyalty based on? It is unlikely that it was based on fear. The NEC did not discipline north-east activists who openly supported the Popular Front in 1938, and only a handful of the main activists were expelled or threatened with such in 1939. If it was based on fear of the consequences of stepping out of line, then the fear was largely unfounded. As argued below, loyalty was also not based on satisfaction with the national leadership. Loyalty to Labour in the region was not blind and certainly did not accept everything the national leadership did or did not do. Rather, it appears to have been based on the belief that the labour movement was the best method of pursuing the interests of its members, regardless, and sometimes in spite of, the leadership.

The attitudes of important individuals in the regional labour movement suggest other reasons for the Popular Front's unpopularity. Some north-east Labour MPs seemed uninterested in foreign affairs. The awful economic problems of their constituents were a far greater concern. Others displayed complacency regarding the international situation.<sup>91</sup> However, these attitudes were not representative of the rank-and-file, many of whom were active on Spain.<sup>92</sup> Notwithstanding this, the Popular Front remained fundamentally an expression of radical liberalism. This is significant in explaining its lack of support in the North-East.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, it proposed an alliance with Communists and Liberals, both of whom offended large sections of the north-east labour movement. In March 1938, for example, William Maclean (Wansbeck Labour parliamentary candidate) rejected 'new alliances to left or right' as they made for 'parliamentary weakness'.<sup>94</sup> This was despite Maclean's own constituency being a Conservative seat in this period. Alliances demanded compromise too. As one regional commentator wrote:

Popular Front is the wrong name. UnPopular Front is truer. [...] Any party which stands for certain definite principles will find that many of those principles will have to be thrown overboard if it is necessary to curry favour with supporters from other parties'.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>90</sup> *Durham Chronicle*, 7 Jan., 18 Feb. 1938.

<sup>91</sup> Examples of the first type are Tom Sexton, MP (Barnard Castle) and Joe Batey, MP (Spennymoor). An example of the latter is a comment on the Munich crisis by W.J. Stewart, MP (Houghton-le-Spring) in late October 1938. Stewart said that 'during the crisis he came to the conclusion that there would never be a war. He had never budged from that opinion, but he thought the carving up of Czechoslovakia was cruel, wrong and unnecessary'. Hansard, 5th series, 1938, 332, 292–294; *Durham Chronicle*, 15 Apr., 28 Oct. 1938.

<sup>92</sup> There was considerable campaigning on issues around support for the Spanish Republican government conducted by substantial sections of the north-east labour movement. This appeared to be at the expense of agitation on domestic issues such as the Means Test, which declined markedly after early 1937. Mates, thesis, pp. 109–59.

<sup>93</sup> Jupp, *Radical Left*, p. 120; D. L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933–9' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Huddersfield Univ. 1999), p. 411.

<sup>94</sup> NRO, 527/A/3, Wansbeck constituency Labour Party Minutes, 19 Mar. 1938.

<sup>95</sup> *Blaydon Courier*, 13 May 1938.

The regional labour movement was more ambivalent than openly hostile to Communists. North-East Labour leaders spent very little time condemning the doctrine and its practitioners. Instead, opposition to communism was manifest in the distinct lack of 'official' (i.e. non-Communist) regional labour movement support for all Communist ventures. The Communist Party remained relatively small and lacked influence in the region. Its logistical ability to advance its policies, such as the Popular Front, was consequently highly limited.<sup>96</sup> The party was unattractive to Labour for practical reasons too. It had very little electoral influence in the region and certainly not enough to win Labour a marginal seat. In fact, regional Labour leaders regarded Communist support as more of a vote loser.<sup>97</sup> However, there was no evidence that events in the Soviet Union, particularly the 'Show Trials', had any effect on attitudes within the 'official' north-east labour movement, as they had elsewhere.<sup>98</sup> Regarding the North-East District Communist Party, there is no evidence of opposition to the Popular Front policy. The regional party attempted to advocate and pursue the policy as much as its meagre resources would allow. There was equally no obvious disquiet from Communists in the region at the signing of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact in August 1939.<sup>99</sup>

For the 'official' labour movement, a potential alliance with Liberals spawned a considerable number of additional reasons to oppose the Popular Front. These were emphasized by the national Labour leadership and strongly resonated in the North-East. Jupp has claimed that NEC attacks on non-socialists and the idea of class collaboration 'probably aroused more sympathy among the party membership [. . .]'.<sup>100</sup> In proposing the Popular Front the left 'broke with the tradition of the labour movement. According to this tradition independence from the other two major parties was the reason for the existence of the Labour Party'.<sup>101</sup> The Liberal Party was not the electoral force it once had been. The Liberal Party received its lowest ever vote in the 1935 general election. In 1936, Liberals only had 189 constituency associations and less than a third of these were active.<sup>102</sup> Because of the existence of local electoral pacts between Liberals and Conservatives, it is difficult to determine where Liberals were active in north-east local elections in the late 1930s. If the 1935 general election is an accurate reflection of Liberal strength in the region, then Liberals only had a significant presence in Barnard Castle and Bishop Auckland in the south of County Durham, and South Shields and Tynemouth on the Tyne.<sup>103</sup> Tactically, Labour was very unlikely to want an alliance with parties that were not as influential as they had been in the past (especially as Labour won three of these four north-east seats in 1935).

<sup>96</sup> Although the regional Communist Party appeared broadly supportive of the Popular Front strategy, residual sectarianism within it also acted against the policy's advancement.

<sup>97</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 53–56.

<sup>98</sup> Murphy, thesis, pp. 386, 403.

<sup>99</sup> See Lewis H. Mates, 'A "Most Fruitful Period"? The North-East District Communist Party and the Popular Front Period, 1935–9', *North-East History*, 36 (2004), 95–98.

<sup>100</sup> Jupp, *Radical Left*, p. 122.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>102</sup> Eatwell, thesis, p. 206.

<sup>103</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 222–31.

As Eatwell has noted, there was Labour support for the Popular Front in areas where the situation seemed hopeless for Labour, such as Cornwall.<sup>104</sup> This was not the case in the North-East. A Liberal stronghold before the First World War, the region was divided between supporters of the National Government and Labour after 1935.<sup>105</sup> Electoral expediency in the North-East meant that Popular Front supporters were always going to have problems convincing the labour movement in County Durham. As Ellen Wilkinson admitted in January 1939, the situation in County Durham was 'not so serious because of the strong position the party holds in that area'.<sup>106</sup> Of the fifteen County Durham seats covered in this article (Sunderland was a two-member constituency) Labour won twelve in 1935.<sup>107</sup> In 1935, thirteen of the fifteen election contests in County Durham were straight fights. Of these, one was between Labour and Liberal (Bishop Auckland) and the rest were between Labour and National Government candidates. A Popular Front pact would have meant no Liberal opposition in Bishop Auckland, but Labour won there anyway. In the other straight fights, there is no indication that a Liberal alliance with Labour would have helped the party. In fact, where Liberals stood as an independent third party it seems to have benefited Labour by taking votes from the Conservatives, for example in Barnard Castle in 1935. In 1931, Labour lost in a straight fight to the Conservatives in the seat. In 1935, the Labour share of the vote increased from 44.7 per cent to 49.8 per cent, the Conservative vote decreasing from 55.3 per cent to 44.2 per cent. The Liberal secured just 6.1 per cent, but this appears to have been at the expense of the Conservative. This suggests that when not given the choice of a Liberal candidate, Liberal voters generally opted for Conservatives rather than Labour in the region. G. L. Dodds has claimed that, with the collapse of the local Liberal Party, the Conservatives received the Liberal vote, thereby winning the two Sunderland seats in 1931.<sup>108</sup>

The case of South Shields also revealed that the presence of three parties helped Labour. In 1931, there was a straight fight between Liberal and Labour, the Liberal winning with 59.8 per cent. In 1935, a National Labour candidate received 23.6 per cent of the vote, most of which must have come from the Liberal who took 28.3 per cent. This allowed Labour to win the seat on 48.1 per cent. There was no guarantee that, in the absence of a Liberal candidate in South Shields, Liberal voters would vote Labour if their party were aligned with it in a pact. The two South Shields results suggest that much of the Liberal vote in 1931 was in fact Conservative and that, with a section of Liberals again an independent electoral force, this divided the anti-Labour vote. The evidence of Barnard Castle and South Shields suggests that Hugh Dalton was right to argue that it was unlikely that a Lib/Lab pact would have induced many Liberals voters to vote Labour.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Eatwell, thesis, p. 194.

<sup>105</sup> For details, see A. W. Purdue, 'The Liberal and Labour Parties in North-East Politics 1900–1914: the Struggle for Supremacy', *International Review of Social History*, 26:1 (1981), 1–24.

<sup>106</sup> *Shields Gazette*, 23 Jan. 1939.

<sup>107</sup> The two Sunderland seats and Gateshead were the only ones Labour did not win in 1935. Thus, when arguing for the Popular Front at a Sunderland Communist crusade meeting Reg Bishop could only really cite the town as an example of one which should be a 'backbone Labour seat', but which could not be won by Labour without progressive support. This contention was by no means certain, however. *Daily Worker* (first edition), 20 Feb. 1939.

<sup>108</sup> G. L. Dodds, *A History of Sunderland* (Sunderland, 1995), p. 99.

<sup>109</sup> Hugh Dalton, 'The Popular Front', *Political Quarterly* (Oct.–Dec. 1936), p. 486.

Labour was far weaker in Northumberland, winning only one of nine seats in the county. Ostensibly, the practical electoral case for the Popular Front in Northumberland was far stronger. Yet only at Tynemouth was there a possibility that anti-government forces could benefit from electoral unity. From 1922, Liberals and Labour secured a little less than a third of the vote each, allowing the Conservative victory on a minority vote. Again, though, it is not certain that the absence of a Liberal candidate would have induced Liberals to vote Labour. (If Liberal voters behaved like Liberal activists in the town, discussed below, then most of the Liberal vote would have gone to the Conservatives). Equally, it is not clear what Labour voters would have done if a Popular Front Liberal candidate had stood. Elsewhere in Northumberland, Labour fought only government candidates, winning Morpeth. In the seven straight fights that Labour lost to government candidates north of the Tyne, the presence of Liberal candidates, as at Barnard Castle, could well have helped them by taking votes from the Conservatives. Of course, Popular Front supporters could cite the national picture in arguing their case, or assert that the Popular Front was about creating a mass anti-government movement immediately, rather than a simple electoral pact at election time. Had the electoral situation in the North-East suggested more strongly that a Liberal-Labour pact would be advantageous, this could only have assisted Popular Front advocates. Yet, as with Labour electoral co-operation with Communists, if there was no *ideological commitment* to a pact, then even an extremely strong practical case would have had little or no effect.<sup>110</sup>

Regardless of these considerations, the situation for Labour in the North-East was evidently not hopeless. The Popular Front seemed defeatist, especially in a region where Labour was far from defeated. The anti-Popular Front DCFLP circular was upbeat when it appealed 'earnestly to our organizations to plan for victory [and] to extend their efforts'.<sup>111</sup> Like West Yorkshire, the North-East was an industrial area where Labour was dominant in many localities and wedded to the idea of remaining an independent force.<sup>112</sup> The fear that a Popular Front would actually stimulate a Liberal revival must also have characterized the attitudes of some regional labour movement leaders, who regarded Lib/Lab pacts as a discredited tactic.

As noted above, the fall of the Spanish Republic in March 1939 must have had some effect in disillusioning Petition campaign supporters in the labour movement. However, generally speaking, far from galvanizing greater support for the Popular Front, the urgent situation in Spain acted as a *distraction* from it.<sup>113</sup> The distraction of 'Spain' is vividly illustrated by the stark contrast between the level of labour movement support secured by Cripps's and the Tyneside foodship campaigns, which were running concurrently. Trevelyan and other left-wing Cripps supporters, such

<sup>110</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 182–83.

<sup>111</sup> *Durham Chronicle*, 6 May 1938.

<sup>112</sup> Murphy, thesis, pp. 382–87, 411, 440.

<sup>113</sup> Of course, in some cases, this worked the other way round. For example, Trevelyan decided to donate £100 to Cripps's Petition campaign in Feb. 1939, instead of giving it, as he had previously intended, to support a plan for sending raw materials to Spain. Highly impressed by Cripps's plan, Trevelyan thought that 'to fundamentally alter the position here and really threaten our government would be a bigger help to Spain than anything'. However, Trevelyan represented a small minority of labour movement opinion. NRL, CPTX133, C.P. Trevelyan letter to wife, 6 Feb. 1939; Mates, thesis, p. 184.

as Blenkinsop, also drew the erroneous conclusion that ‘non-political’, ‘Aid Spain’, campaigns illustrated a widespread desire for political co-operation against appeasement.<sup>114</sup> The experience of Cripps’s abject failure to mobilize labour movement support in the North-East must have disabused them of this idea.

The effect of ‘Spain’ was not new. There had been an equally clear illustration of the distraction the conflict provided in 1938. Labour’s change in national attitude from supporting the government’s policy of non-intervention in Spain in 1936 to advocacy of the Republic’s right to buy arms in 1937 had not placated many grassroots activists. Disquiet at the national leadership’s inactivity on the issue and other foreign policy concerns was manifest in calls for an emergency national labour movement conference on Spain or the general international situation. By mid-1938, almost the entire north-east labour movement had expressed its desire for such a conference. (Owing to a change in the timing of the national Labour Party conference, none was scheduled for 1938).<sup>115</sup> Indeed, in June 1938 a conference of the North-East Federation of Trades Councils, Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties and Co-operative Party went as far as to call for a national labour movement conference ‘to formulate *industrial and political action to remove the Chamberlain government*’ [my emphasis].<sup>116</sup> This apparent desire to discuss the possibility of industrial direct action to place pressure on the government momentarily placed the regional movement far to the left of the constitution-obsessed national leadership.

However, the evident grassroots disaffection at the national leadership’s refusal to organize a conference did not impel constituency Labour Parties in regions like the North-East into supporting the Popular Front. This almost complete inability to capitalize on discontent within the official labour movement rank-and-file suggests a further reason for the Popular Front’s failure. Popular Fronters could not openly advocate mass industrial direct action for political ends for fear of scaring away potential support from Liberals and the middle class in general. Consequently, for a substantial part of the official labour movement rank-and-file, including much of the supposedly ‘moderate’ and ‘loyal’ North-East, the Popular Front policy was simply ‘too Liberal’ to have any appeal. This was especially problematic for the Communist Party. Its support for the Popular Front forced it to tone down previous policies and rhetoric at a time when open advocacy of industrial direct action could have had a

<sup>114</sup> In retrospect, Trevelyan wasted his money on Cripps’s campaign. However, by February 1939, little short of extensive British and French military intervention on the side of the Republic could have saved it. Foodships were too little and too late, and the number who saw them as aiding the Republic against fascism as opposed to simply providing succour to starving and innocent civilians is also unclear. Lewis H. Mates, ‘Britain’s De Facto Popular Front? The Case of the Tyneside Foodship Campaign, 1938–1939’, *Labour History Review*, 69:1 (2004), 323–45.

<sup>115</sup> The Northumberland Miners’ Association, South Shields town Labour Party, Houghton-le-Spring, Seaham and Newcastle East constituency Labour Parties, both the Northumberland and Tyneside and Durham Federations of Labour Parties and a North-East Federation of Trades Councils, Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties and Co-operative Party conference on the international situation in Jun. 1938 all made separate calls for the NEC to convene a national conference on Spain and/or the international situation. NRO, 759/68, (NMA Annual Report) Council meeting, 14 Mar. 1938; Executive meeting, 25 Mar. 1938; SSPL, LPM6, South Shields town Labour Party Minutes, party special meeting, 24 Apr. 1938; trades council executive meetings, 12 Apr., 6 May, 5 Jul., 15 Jul. 1938; party executive meetings, 6 May, 3 Jun. 1938; NEC Minutes, 5 May 1938; *Durham Chronicle*, 8 Apr., 24 Jun. 1938; *North Mail*, 20 Jun., 5 Apr. 1938.

<sup>116</sup> *North Mail*, 20 Jun. 1938.

significant resonance within the official labour movement, in the North-East and elsewhere.<sup>117</sup> Arguably, support for the Popular Front actually cost the Communist Party a degree of influence within the labour movement in the North-East.

In the North-East, interest in the Popular Front peaked in early summer 1938, at the same time as clamour from regional labour movement organizations for a national labour movement conference on Spain and the 'international situation' (though the latter was far more supported than the former). In the aftermath of Munich, support for a Popular Front in the North-East appeared less than in summer 1938. Even at its peak, this support was insignificant.<sup>118</sup> Thus, even if Cripps had launched his campaign at an earlier, more propitious moment, it is highly doubtful that he would have secured significantly more support in the North-East and elsewhere.

In attacking the Popular Front in March 1938, William Maclean mentioned another significant consideration. He argued that 'there can exist many approaches and many angles of vision' within the Labour Party, making it 'in the true sense, a Popular Front'.<sup>119</sup> Thus, one of the reasons that Labour did not need a Popular Front was because, in some senses, *it already was one*. As the Labour educationalist, R. H. Tawney, recognized in 1932, the Labour Party was clearly a cross-class alliance: 'If variety of educational experience and economic conditions among its active supporters be the tests, the Labour Party is, whether fortunately or not, as a mere matter of fact, less of a class party than any other British party.'<sup>120</sup> Generally speaking, Maclean's attitude appeared representative of the majority in the North-East. He approved of a diverse Labour Party and was implicitly critical of the NEC when he said 'unity is strength, but unity does not mean rigid regimentation and heresy hunting'.<sup>121</sup> There was very little witch hunting in the north-east against Popular Front supporters. Indeed, the region was a good deal more tolerant of its heretics than the national movement.<sup>122</sup> Yet, like the vast regional majority, Maclean did not support the Popular Front itself.

The very level of bickering and disputes within the regional movement in the period also testifies to its diversity.<sup>123</sup> Internal division was a further factor that worked against those seeking an alliance with outside forces. It was difficult enough ensuring some semblance of internal unity without the added complications of securing alliances with other parties. Roger Eatwell has argued that a Popular Front could have been mobilized around Labour's *Immediate Programme*. It was moderate and would not have alienated potential supporters from the right such as Liberals. This would also have precluded Labour objections that the movement was not socialist.<sup>124</sup> Yet it

<sup>117</sup> National leaders with a power base in the North-East predictably ruled out the use of industrial action for political ends. At a Durham County Labour delegate conference after Munich, Dalton argued that a general strike could not be used to bring the government 'to its senses' as this was not democratic. *Durham Chronicle*, 4 Nov. 1938.

<sup>118</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 175–88.

<sup>119</sup> NRO, 527/A/3, Wansbeck constituency Labour Party Minutes, 19 Mar. 1938.

<sup>120</sup> In *Political Quarterly*, III (1932), 333, quoted in M. Pugh, "'Class Traitors': Conservative Recruits to Labour, 1900–30", *English Historical Review*, LXIII (1998), 40. Martin Pugh noted that the Labour governments of 1924, 1929–31 and 1945 were the most representative of British society as a whole.

<sup>121</sup> NRON, 527/A/3, Wansbeck constituency Labour Party Minutes, 19 Mar. 1938.

<sup>122</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 65–78.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65–78.

<sup>124</sup> Eatwell, thesis, pp. 214–16.

was surely simpler for Popular Front supporters to join the party that already advocated this programme, rather than attempt to engineer a cross-party alliance with all its attendant problems.<sup>125</sup> These ‘Popular Fronters’ could then have attempted to force the leadership to take a more active stand on its policies. As noted above, the leadership resisted calls for a national conference despite considerable pressure. Still, it was more likely to listen to its own members than to Liberals and others outside the party. The labour movement was already very broad in social and political terms. It could accommodate those who desired a stronger stand against the fascist powers and were able to accept its moderate domestic policies. Furthermore, it excluded Communists (at least theoretically if not necessarily in practice), which would have repelled many to the right of Labour.

*The ‘Capitalists’: North-East Liberal and Conservative attitudes*

Cripps’s 1939 campaign aimed primarily at galvanizing support for the Popular Front inside the labour movement as most Popular Fronters agreed on the need for Labour Party leadership of the project. Still, Liberal support, especially, was required if the idea was to work. In theory, north-east Liberal support should have been forthcoming. The party’s foreign policy was similar to Labour’s and important national Liberal Party figures such as the party leader, Archibald Sinclair, and the MPs Wilfred Roberts, Geoffrey Mander and Sir Richard Acland supported the Popular Front since 1936. Vernon Bartlett, who won the Bridgwater by-election as an independent progressive in November 1938, was also a Liberal. Many significant north-east Liberals echoed their party’s stance on foreign relations, calling for the establishment of a system of international ‘collective security’ that included Soviet Russia.<sup>126</sup> However, there was very little direct evidence of north-east Liberal involvement in the United Peace Alliance campaign. There were an indeterminate number of ‘progressive organizations’ outside the labour movement represented at a campaign conference in the region in May 1938, the same month as the Liberal Party nationally backed the strategy. However, the only organization that was definitely represented and *probably* contained Liberals (and which itself represented the Popular Front in microcosm) was the Left Book Club. None of the high profile regional politicians who endorsed this conference were Liberals. Only one north-east Liberal organization, Newcastle West Liberal Association, obviously supported the Liberal Party’s renewed national endorsement of the Popular Front in the wake of Munich. Even then, there was no indication that Liberals in Newcastle West acted on the resolution by attempting to build links with Labour in the town.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> This was what people such as Attlee thought. Swift argued that Attlee was reasonable to suggest that Liberals and the Communist Party, as smaller parties, should drop their differences with Labour and not the other way round. J. Swift, ‘Clement Attlee and the Labour Party in Opposition, 1931–40’ (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Lancaster Univ. 1997), p. 274.

<sup>126</sup> For example, in late 1936, S. Phillips, then secretary of the Northern Liberal Federation and chairholder of Newcastle Central constituency, spoke at Newcastle urging a mutual assistance pact between ‘peaceful countries including Russia’. Phillips saw Germany as the ‘centre of disturbance in Europe’ as ‘she desired those things that could only be achieved through war, and was content to attain them through war’. *North Mail*, 9 Dec. 1936.

<sup>127</sup> *Daily Worker*, 27 May 1938; *Blaydon Courier*, 3 Jun. 1938; *North Mail*, 9 Dec. 1938; Brockway, *Workers Front*, p. 244; S. Samuels, ‘The Left Book Club’, *JCH*, 1:2 (1966), 65, 67, 72–73, 75; Mates, thesis, pp. 47–50.

North-East Liberals were equally un-supportive of the Popular Front in 1939. The national Liberal organization told Liberal Associations that there would be no official participation in Cripps's campaign, but that individual Liberals could participate. In the North-East only one 'Liberal' figure appeared to have been involved. Enid Atkinson, a member of Lloyd George's grandly titled grouping, the 'Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction', addressed a 'Petition Campaign' conference in Gateshead.<sup>128</sup> However, the minuscule 'Council of Action' was the only 'Liberal' body that obviously supported the Popular Front in the North-East, and it was not even strictly aligned with the Liberal Party.<sup>129</sup> Moreover, this support was not new in 1938. 'Council of Action' activists had been active with labour movement leftists in the north-east peace councils (Tyneside Joint Peace Council and Sunderland and District Peace Council) since 1936.<sup>130</sup> The only other direct evidence of Liberal support came in Bishop Auckland where another indeterminate number signed the Cripps Petition.<sup>131</sup>

Of the significant north-east Liberals, Raymond Jones, parliamentary candidate for South Shields, went the closest to supporting the Popular Front in 1939. He told his constituency party annual meeting in February 1939 that 'It was high time there was a change of government in this country. The Labour Party was so engrossed in seeking a socialist state that it preferred to risk a continuance of the present government rather than join hands with any other party in defeating it'.<sup>132</sup> This was significant as, before 1939, Jones spent as much time attacking Labour as the government.<sup>133</sup> However, Jones did not mention the Popular Front at all in this speech in February 1939. Peculiarly, Jones' solution to the problem of the government's foreign policy and Labour's commitment to a socialist state was that one hundred Liberals were needed in Parliament as a 'safeguard'.<sup>134</sup> Not surprisingly, he played no part in the Cripps agitation. Other Liberals were more sympathetic towards the government. In April 1939, for example, M. R. Shankcross (secretary of the Northern Liberal Federation) said that Liberals would support the government 'so long as it continues with the policy of collective security'. While Shankcross argued that the present problematic situation was attributable to the government's foreign policy, he still thought that 'this was not the time for recriminations'.<sup>135</sup> The country was, he considered, now united 'left to right' behind the government.

<sup>128</sup> *Tribune*, 3 Mar. 1939. Lloyd George established the 'Council of Action' in summer 1935 to promote his 'new deal' proposals to tackle unemployment and promote peace. Although professing to be 'non-party', the 'Council of Action' was designed to concert efforts to secure a parliament pledged to a progressive policy based on the proposals. Nationally, 'Council of Action' branches formed the basis of Petition Committees in some localities. P. Rowland, *Lloyd George* (1975), pp. 713–23; F. Owen, *Tempestuous Journey. Lloyd George His Life and Times* (1954), pp. 726–45; Eatwell, thesis, pp. 111, 225, 267, 341–42.

<sup>129</sup> The 'Council of Action' nationally was a small organization and this was reflected in the North-East. The 'north area' 'Council of Action' appears to have been a small group of middle-class radicals. Nationally, there was a feeling within the 'Council of Action' that it had done well out of its involvement in the Spain and China relief campaigns and the Cripps Petition campaign, which facilitated the recruitment of some disillusioned Labour Party members. It is uncertain if this occurred in the North-East. Certainly the names connected with the 'Council of Action' in the regional press in 1939 were largely the same as in 1936. Eatwell, thesis, pp. 390–92.

<sup>130</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 36–40, 175.

<sup>131</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 12 Mar. 1939; *Tribune*, 6 Apr. 1939.

<sup>132</sup> *Shields Gazette*, 11 Feb. 1939.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 27 Sep., 2; 15 Oct. 1937; 13 Oct. 1938.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1939.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 20 Apr. 1939.



Some north-east Liberals, such as Raymond Jones, were interested in foreign policy and critical of the government in broadly similar ways to Labour. Thus the Popular Front programme, based on radical Liberal foreign policy concerns and neglecting domestic policies where Liberal and Labour most diverged, must not have posed a problem in itself. However, there were practical reasons why an electoral alliance was problematic for Liberals. Roger Eatwell has claimed that many Liberals in the North opposed the Popular Front as they feared that an alliance would ultimately lead to the eclipse of the party.<sup>136</sup> This was the opposite of the argument used by Labour Party opponents of the Popular Front who feared that it might provoke a Liberal revival. Both arguments were plausible, depending on the workings of any putative electoral pact. Liberal fears of being eclipsed certainly could be justified in the North-East. In 1935, the only north-east Liberal MP lost to Labour in a straight fight at Bishop Auckland, and there were Liberal candidates in only three other north-east constituencies. Assuming that the Popular Front party with the best placed candidate in 1935 would automatically choose the candidate at a future general election, there would have been no Liberal candidates in the region.<sup>137</sup> However, Liberal Popular Front supporters could have argued that the party, without an alliance with Labour, would not win a seat in the region anyway. Moreover, it was possible that an electoral agreement would force Labour to stand down in a north-east constituency and allow the Liberal a free run. This scenario must have informed Labour fears of a Liberal revival.<sup>138</sup>

Other aspects of the Popular Front that alienated Labour Party members applied equally to Liberals. Many did not wish to ally with Communists for the same reasons, and because Communists theoretically proposed to end capitalism. As with north-east labour movement attitudes, there was no evidence that the Moscow Show Trials worsened the image of the Communist Party in the eyes of Liberals. Communism was theoretical anathema to liberalism and that was sufficient.

Yet, for many north-east Liberals, socialism was little different. Tynemouth was particularly significant in this context. The local labour movement was weak there, while liberalism remained relatively strong.<sup>139</sup> As noted above, a roughly equal three-way split vote gave the Conservatives victory on a minority vote. Tynemouth Labour Party supported the Popular Front by 1939. At least one important local Liberal, Councillor Stanley Holmes, appeared sympathetic to co-operation with the left.<sup>140</sup> However, Tynemouth Liberals regarded the Conservatives as their natural allies. An 'anti-socialist' pact existed in the town between Conservatives and Liberals before

<sup>136</sup> Eatwell, thesis, pp. 206, 279.

<sup>137</sup> In 1935 the Liberal Party came closest to Labour in the region at Tynemouth. Liberals polled relatively well in South Shields in 1935 (28.3 per cent), but Labour won this seat with 48.1 per cent.

<sup>138</sup> It was possible that the pact would entail 'progressive' candidatures instead of using party labels. This created scenarios that could be used to support both Liberal fears of eclipse and Labour fears of a Liberal revival. Whether 'progressive' candidatures could have mobilized the majority of both Labour and Liberal votes must remain a matter for speculation.

<sup>139</sup> As recently as 1930, Tynemouth was one of five boroughs in Britain where Liberals were still the largest party (with eighteen of the thirty-six councillors). C. Cook, 'Liberals, Labour and Elections', in *The Politics of Reappraisal*, ed. G. Peele and C. Cook (1975), p. 170.

<sup>140</sup> Holmes, who was Tynemouth Liberal parliamentary candidate in the 1931 and 1935 general elections, supported a local Communist-organized anti-Means Test March in mid-October 1936 and appeared on a Tyneside Joint Peace Council platform in November 1936. Mates, thesis, pp. 32, 36.

1936. In practice, the pact did not work well in Tynemouth. Both Liberals and Conservatives assumed the 'Moderate' label at municipal elections, but they still stood against other Moderates.<sup>141</sup> The parties made unsuccessful efforts to remedy this situation in 1936 and had a scare in December when a Communist, standing against no fewer than five Moderate candidates, was eighteen votes short of winning a by-election seat.<sup>142</sup> In February 1937, the president of Tynemouth Ratepayers' Association warned that 'unless the Moderate forces combine and show a united front, it will be inevitable that the Communist and Socialist forces will obtain command in this town also'.<sup>143</sup> Attempts to establish a firmer electoral understanding continued throughout spring 1937. However, eventually the Liberals refused to finalize arrangements with Conservatives owing to a 'bitter feeling' and divisions continued in the 1937 and 1938 municipal elections.<sup>144</sup> There remained a desire within Tynemouth Liberal circles for a degree of autonomy in an area where they remained relatively strong. Notwithstanding this, the situation in Tynemouth supported Hugh Dalton's case against the Popular Front. Dalton argued that the Liberal vote was more likely to go to Labour in constituencies where both Liberals and Labour were weak and where even a combined vote could not defeat the Conservative. However, in constituencies where Labour 'grows strong, Liberals have a habit [...] of entering into compacts with Conservatives [...] to "keep Labour out"'.<sup>145</sup> Labour remained weak on Tynemouth municipal council, but had, for the first time, come second to the Conservatives in the constituency in the 1935 general election, usurping the Liberals. (The Liberals secured 23.1 per cent with Labour gaining 29.8 per cent). When the Tynemouth Ratepayers' Association spokesman implied that Labour and Communists represented a combined electoral threat, despite Labour in the town not being interested in allying with Communists, it is likely he was expressing a genuinely held political perspective (rather than disingenuously attempting to discredit Labour with the electorate).<sup>146</sup>

Furthermore, it seems Tynemouth Liberals' attitudes characterized those of the majority of north-east Liberals. Nationally, anti-Labour electoral pacts between Liberals and Conservatives began when Labour started to have an impact in local elections after 1918 and such pacts had been agreed in virtually all north-east towns by 1930. This proliferation of local 'anti-socialist' electoral pacts in the region, most of which worked far better than that at Tynemouth, suggests a strong ideological aspect to Liberal attitudes in the North-East. Liberals identified themselves with Conservatives, who were also capitalists, rather than with Labour, which they regarded,

<sup>141</sup> The case of Tynemouth thus contradicts Cook's claim that that no Moderates stood against each other in the period as Liberals could not afford to act outside of these pacts. In fact, split Moderate votes occurred at Tynemouth throughout the early nineteen-thirties. In 1934 Moderates stood against each other and Labour or Communist candidates in four wards. However, this did not happen in 1935. *Evening Chronicle*, 2 Nov. 1934; 2 Nov. 1935; Cook in Peele and Cook, *Politics of Reappraisal*, p. 179.

<sup>142</sup> *Shields News*, 7, 8 Oct., 6, 13 Nov., 3 Dec. 1936; *North Mail*, 24 Oct., 3 Nov., 3 Dec. 1936; *Evening Chronicle*, 3 Nov. 1936.

<sup>143</sup> This was an overstatement. Moderates dominated Tynemouth council and there was very little chance that their control could be threatened by Labour, whether combined with Communists or not, in the near future. *Shields News*, 2 Feb. 1937.

<sup>144</sup> *Shields News*, 24 May 1937; *Evening Chronicle*, 2 Nov. 1937; 2 Nov. 1938.

<sup>145</sup> Dalton, *PQ*, 7:4, 486.

<sup>146</sup> *North Mail*, 15, 16, 22 Oct. 1937; 2 Nov. 1937.

rightly or wrongly, as socialist.<sup>147</sup> This fundamental ideological underpinning was more important in determining attitudes than any similarity between Liberal and Labour foreign policies. Thus Eatwell's claim that Liberals could have been brought into a Popular Front based around Labour's *Immediate Programme* is very doubtful for north-east Liberals. Regardless of whether the programme was 'socialist', north-east Liberals were likely to have *perceived it as such* and therefore opposed it. This was Liberal 'loyalty': not to the party as such, but to Liberal principles. As these older established patterns of thinking and behaving appeared well entrenched in the North-East, it was consequently highly unlikely that there would have been any local electoral arrangements between anti-government parties in the region in the event of a general election. Eatwell noted that national Labour leaders could not cite Liberal opposition to the Popular Front as an argument against it.<sup>148</sup> However, the anti-socialist attitude of most north-east Liberals provided regional Labour leaders with yet another argument against the Popular Front, should they have cared to use it.

There was another aspect of the more 'conservative' nature of north-east Liberalism.<sup>149</sup> The National Liberal Party in the region was much stronger than its 'independent' equivalent. In 1935, there were National Liberal candidates in five north-east constituencies. They were successful in Sunderland, Gateshead and Newcastle East and defeated in straight fights with Labour in Consett and Durham. Thus, the majority of north-east Liberals had chosen to stay with the National Government. Already involved in a parliamentary pact with Conservatives, these Liberals therefore would be very difficult, if not impossible, to attract to a pact with Labour (especially as none of them seemed to have any problems with Chamberlain's foreign policy; see below). As argued above, Liberal voters in the North-East appear to have been largely on the right of the Liberal political spectrum too. As general election results in Barnard Castle constituency showed, they tended to vote Conservative, rather than Labour in the absence of a Liberal candidate.

The only direct evidence of rank-and-file Conservative/National Liberal support for the Popular Front in the North-East was the indeterminate number of National Government supporters who apparently signed the Cripps Petition at Bishop Auckland.<sup>150</sup> Dissent at government foreign policy was a necessary starting point for

<sup>147</sup> For example, the pact at Newcastle: Cook was broadly correct to cite Newcastle as an example of where Moderates did not stand against each other, although the situation was complicated by the presence of 'Independents', 'Moderates', 'Progressives' and 'Municipal Reformers' all standing in different numbers at each election. Cook in Peele and Cook, *Politics of Reappraisal*, pp. 169–70, 178–79.

<sup>148</sup> Eatwell argued that there was likely to have been between thirty and fifty such agreements in Britain. Thus, the Popular Front could well have secured some kind of success. Eatwell made little of this important point. Eatwell, thesis, pp. 205–8, 214–16, 376.

<sup>149</sup> This was not a new development. B. E. Naylor claimed that the Liberal Party in the North-East was to the right of the party nationally in the Edwardian period. For this reason, more progressive Liberals joined the ILP, which in turn placed the ILP to the right of the party nationally. This partly explains why the Labour Party in the region became a 'bastion of right wing labourism'. B. E. Naylor, 'Ramsay Macdonald and Seaham Labour Politics', *Bulletin of the North-East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 15 (1981), 30–31.

<sup>150</sup> *Tribune*, 6 Apr. 1939. There were eleven National Government MPs in the North-East after 1935: eight Conservatives and three National Liberals. The National Labour Party hardly existed in the region. In 1935 it only fielded candidates in Seaham (Ramsay Macdonald's seat) and South Shields. In February 1938 Cuthbert Headlam complained that the Conservative Party could not find any 'National Socialists' [*sic.*] to support Conservative speakers. DRO, D/HE/34, Headlam Diary, 25 Feb. 1938.

potential Popular Fronters and this appeared almost non-existent in the region. There were no north-east National Government MPs involved in any group of foreign policy critics that centred around Anthony Eden (who resigned from the Cabinet as Foreign Secretary in February 1938 in protest at Chamberlain's personal conduct of government foreign policy), Winston Churchill, and Harold Macmillan (Conservative MP for Stockton). The most rebellious was Samuel Storey (Sunderland), who, along with Macmillan, Churchill and Eden, abstained from voting on the debate on the Anglo-Italian agreement in November 1938. He had abstained on foreign policy questions perhaps twice previously in 1938. It is possible that Storey abstained in the vote on Labour's censure motion in the debate surrounding Eden's resignation. Colonel Bernard Cruddas (Wansbeck) threatened to rebel on this vote also, but ended up actually voting with the government.<sup>151</sup> Before and subsequently, Cruddas supported government foreign policy. Both he and Storey loyally supported their government in the Commons vote on the government's handling of the Munich crisis on 6 October 1938, when a group of government MPs abstained in protest.<sup>152</sup> The majority of National Government figures in the region merely voiced loyal support for all facets of their government's foreign policy throughout all the government's vicissitudes. Indeed, several north-east government supporters, most notably Alfred Denville MP (Conservative, Newcastle Central), Sir Nicholas Grattan-Doyle (Conservative, Newcastle North), Tom Magnay MP (National Liberal, Gateshead) Sir Robert Aske MP (National Liberal, Newcastle East), and the Marquess of Londonderry and his wife displayed varying degrees of sympathy towards Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Franco's Spain.<sup>153</sup>

Of course, politicians' public pronouncements are likely to have differed considerably from their private thoughts. Fortunately, Cuthbert Headlam, one of the most important and influential north-east Conservatives, left a diary. Headlam moved from almost a pro-fascist stance in 1936 to anti-Nazism soon after (though he remained a Franco supporter). Yet he did not adopt a critique of government foreign policy. Instead, he blamed all Chamberlain's predecessors for the problems Britain faced, including during and after the Munich settlement, which he did not like.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, Headlam was one of very few Conservatives, and unique in the North-East, explicitly to condemn the Popular Front. In March 1939 he told Alnwick Conservatives that the Popular Front 'had ruined France for the time being and had brought disaster

<sup>151</sup> Storey's name did not appear as having voted on the Eden motion, although it is possible he was paired. There is no way of being sure: the *Times* often carried lists of the names of paired MPs, but it did not do so for this vote. Moreover, his name was not mentioned in a regional newspaper report on possible north-east Conservative rebels. In mid-March 1938, Storey announced his intention to protest by abstaining from voting for government moves to organize talks with Italy, although he 'only wanted to be proved wrong'. *Hansard*, 5th series, 1938, 332, 324, 326; 5th series, 1938, 340, 333; *North Mail*, 23, 24 Feb., 16 Mar., 3 Nov. 1938; *Times*, 23 Feb. 1938.

<sup>152</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 12 Oct. 1936; *Blyth News*, 4 Apr. 1938; *Hansard*, fifth series, 1938, 339, 557–560; 'Gracchus', *Your MP* (1944), p. 107.

<sup>153</sup> R. Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right. British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany, 1933–39* (1980), pp. 262–64; S. Haxey, *Tory MP* (1939), pp. 152, 206, 215–17; N.J. Crowson, *Facing Fascism. The Conservative Party and the European Dictators, 1935–1940* (1997), pp. 21, 25; N. Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts* (Whitley Bay, 1995), pp. 29–33; A. De Courcey, *Circe. The Life of Edith, Marchioness of Londonderry* (1992), pp. 268–71; Mates, thesis, pp. 232–34.

<sup>154</sup> DRO, Headlam Diary, D/HE/30, 13 Feb. 1934; D/HE/32, 11 Sep. 1936; D/HE/33, 7, 8, 10, 12 Sep. 1937; D/HE/34, 10 Apr., 19, 25, 26, 29, 30 Sep., 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 17 Oct. 1938; DRO, D/HE/35, 18 Jan., 8 Apr. 1939.

to Spain'.<sup>155</sup> If Headlam's attitude was, as Nigel Crowson claimed, representative of mainstream Conservative opinion, then the Popular Front was never going to attract a significant number of dissident Conservatives.<sup>156</sup> A handful of north-east Conservatives were involved in the Tyneside foodship campaign, but this was of no consequence for the Popular Front project.<sup>157</sup>

### Conclusion

The experience of the Petition Campaign in the North-East largely reflected the national picture. It failed to secure significant support from any section of the labour movement in an important region. Extensive support for Cripps in a moderate dominated Labour region such as the North-East would have suggested that his campaign could have been more successful. This support simply did not materialize. The majority of labour movement moderates in the region permitted the left and their few supporters to conduct their Popular Front campaigns and then comprehensively defeated them in votes on the issue in every constituency Labour Party except one. Strong disquiet at the national leadership's stance, particularly its lack of action on Spain, did not translate into substantial support for the Popular Front. A handful of north-east Labour politicians may have briefly supported a Popular Front at the time of Munich, but if they did their support was very short-lived.<sup>158</sup> It was clear that, apart from the small Communist influenced Labour left, most in the North-East saw their labour movement as sufficient in itself to rectify the situation, if only the leadership would take a firmer lead and discuss tactics with the membership. Even the leadership's refusal to do this did not spawn great support for the Popular Front. Alliances to the left and right brought more problems than they solved, and there was plenty of room for any Popular Front supporter within the Labour Party. Indeed, the Labour Party was already a kind of 'Popular Front', and infinitely preferable to an alliance with a declining political force (liberalism) that could not be trusted to deliver its supporters' votes. The United Peace Alliance failed in the region for these reasons in 1938. Cripps's campaign came at a less propitious time and, despite his energy and resources, Cripps failed even to muster the numbers that had been mobilized in the previous year. This failure was not due to Cripps's personality, the niceties of his programme, or his ill-conceived tactics. The North-East retained its traditional loyalty to the Labour leadership and remained convinced that salvation lay in the electoral victory of a diverse, un-regimented and independent labour movement.<sup>159</sup> The

<sup>155</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 3 Mar. 1939.

<sup>156</sup> Crowson, *Facing Fascism*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>157</sup> Mates, *LHR*, 69:1 (2004), 323–45.

<sup>158</sup> Mates, thesis, pp. 170–75.

<sup>159</sup> In general, the north-east labour movement tolerated its rebels. Trevelyan was the only figure of national standing to be expelled in the region for supporting Cripps. Only Bishop Auckland constituency Labour Party expelled local activists. This was Hugh Dalton's seat, a key opponent of Cripps on the NEC. Lesser ranking politicians such as Wilkes and Blenkinsop were allowed their rebellion without suffering serious consequences. It is debatable whether they would have been expelled had their profile been higher. Lawther and Watson were permitted to continue supporting Cripps without reprimand from DMA council. Like the United Peace Alliance the year before resolutions on the topic were not allowed to appear at DMA council meetings, thereby minimizing division. The same tolerance also ensured that divisions within the regional movement over Catholic attitudes to Labour policies on the Spanish Civil War were minimized. Mates, thesis, pp. 79–108, 117–18.

regional labour movement, an influential component of the national movement, was simply not interested in the Popular Front.

Vehemently opposed to both communism and socialism, and prepared to ally either permanently at parliamentary level or simply at local electoral level with fellow capitalists, it is hardly surprising that the very small 'independent' Liberal forces in the North-East did not provide any noticeable support for the Popular Front. The Liberal Party leader, Archibald Sinclair, feared that a Popular Front alliance with Labour would mean the loss of many members on the right of the party. A Popular Front agreement at national level would surely have completely ended the small independent Liberal presence in the region. North-east Conservatives largely supported their government's foreign policy or rebelled at only aspects of it. This rebellion never led them into firm contact with Popular Fronters on the left. Figures like Headlam showed that considerable disquiet could exist amongst government supporters at its foreign policy, but that the perceived origins of present difficulties in no way led inevitably to an anti-government alliance. In spite of his wealth and undoubted oratorical ability, Cripps was never likely to convince a significant section of the north-east labour movement of the need for a Popular Front. Even if he had, there would have been very few to the right of Labour keen to join forces in the region.