

There was much that British Communists did not know about in the Soviet Union, particularly in the 1930s. They respected the achievements of the Soviet system, and they knew that every criticism they made would be picked up and magnified ten-fold to discredit socialism as a system of government and theoretical base for supplanting capitalism. More could and should have been done to critically analyse Soviet developments but this was a political judgement, not a morality test. Fred Westacott, a longstanding Party full-time worker who died in 2002, put it like this: 'I accepted that there were weaknesses and that mistakes were made, but the ones we knew about paled into insignificance compared with the achievements and the historical importance of a new socialist society in the process of being created'.<sup>52</sup>

First and foremost Ramelson was a British Communist. Like Party activists everywhere he took strength from being part of the international movement which he saw as a powerful force striving for peace and social justice all over the world. Being associated with the international movement alongside parties who had taken and exercised state power was not always comfortable. No other section of the British labour movement, from the Labour Party to the ultra-left, had a comparable network of solidarity links, or such a consistent record of opposition to British imperialism and colonialism. In an interview in the late 1950s Nelson Mandela was asked to comment on the fact that there was never any criticism of the Soviet Union in his speeches or articles. His reply was: 'In the whole world they're our only friends. You don't attack your friends'.<sup>53</sup>

## OVERVIEW

In many respects Bert Ramelson was a modest man not known for making claims about his personal contribution to the struggle for social and economic advance. For Ramelson it was the Party and the movement which mattered, and any gains made were achieved as a result of collective efforts. Nonetheless, political biographers are called upon to make assessments about the role of the individual. It is clear that Bert Ramelson was the most significant figure in the British Communist Party between 1965 and 1979, and that he made one of the most important contributions to strategic thinking across the whole labour movement during this period.

Ramelson was a well-read Marxist whose deep understanding of

theory enabled him to successfully apply this to the practice (both art and science) of the class struggle. He brought this understanding both to the Party and to his work in the trade union movement. As a member of the national Party leadership since 1953 he made an important contribution to the process of developing the Party's programme the *British Road to Socialism*, which for a small Party was a major achievement. It added greatly to the understanding of the need for revolutionary change in Britain as well as raising awareness in the international labour movement of the possibilities of winning and defending state power through a combination of parliamentary and extra-parliamentary struggle. Ramelson was proud of the Party's achievement in drafting such a programme and in updating it periodically over nearly three decades of rapidly changing economic and political developments.

Ramelson's main and considerable contributions were in the field of industrial strategy. Above all he was interested in movement building and, within that, of linking militancy and trade union struggle to the development of a mass socialist consciousness. Like generations of British communists before him, Ramelson saw the organised working class as the core of any revolutionary movement. He recognised that the official trade union movement, with its direct links to the Labour Party and the workplace, was the main political expression of the working people, and therefore the key area of ideological and political struggle. Above all Ramelson provided the strategic thinking which linked progressive changes in the official movement, which for decades before the mid-1960s had been dominated by right-wing reformist leaders, to the development of an effective rank-and-file movement. This meant working with rank-and-file communists and others on the left, including progressive trade union officials, to strengthen broad left organisation in all major unions, which, in Ramelson's view, involved the vital first step of building CP organisation at workplace, industry and union level.

His central conclusion was that only through struggle could the basis be laid for building class consciousness. Rank-and-file activity allied to political clarity could force trade union leaders to the left and 'keep them honest'. The election of left trade union leaders and the subsequent possibility of changing Labour Party policy was not the alternative to building workplace organisation and activity: the two developments were mutually reinforcing. This approach enabled

Ramelson, working with a small group of CP rank-and-file senior activists led by Kevin Halpin, to play a significant role in promoting the LCDTU – arguably the most successful workplace based national organisation in the history of the British trade union movement.

Ramelson also provided strong ideological leadership in the CP's broad campaign against wage controls, including his debates within the Party's economic committee against the neo-Gramscians, where he succeeded in showing the basic flaw in their argument for critical support for a social contract. Here he argued that wage restraint in any guise would demobilise a main engine for progressive social change – the organised trade union movement, particularly at workplace level. This would hold back the struggle to achieve redistribution in the short term and socialism in the longer term. He also argued that the Labour leaders of the 1970s were not interested in progressive social change, but only in using the Social Contract to underpin wage restraint and falling living standards for working people. With a left government things would be different. It could then be possible to discuss a voluntary incomes policy together with normal collective bargaining. Ramelson's view was that the two were not mutually exclusive.

Besides being an innovator in strategic thinking, Ramelson also helped to bring new approaches to the means of struggle, as, for example, with his promotion of the flying picket strategy in the Yorkshire coalfield, and the LCDTU – the first national rank-and-file movement which had the prime strategic objective of forcing the official unions to the left rather than becoming an alternative centre of power. He was also a formidable propagandist and advocate for socialism, both in his speeches and his writings, particularly his pamphlets.

In the end the Party to which Ramelson gave his life's work disintegrated. Critics have explained the CP's failure as an inability to establish an independent political identity. They argue that the Party's revolutionary strategy was too dependent on the Labour Party and left trade union leaders in delivering a socialist parliamentary majority backed by extra-parliamentary struggle. As part of the international communist movement it was seen to be subservient to the interests of the Soviet Union. In all essentials these critics present the CP as a reformist fringe Party without a distinctive role to play, and without either the ambition or ability to have made a significant contribution

to progressive politics in Britain. Once the temporary successes of the 1960s and 1970s, mainly in the trade union field, had been overtaken by changes in industrial structures, which marginalised traditional industries and undermined the position of skilled manual workers, the demise of the Party began to seem a possibility; and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 ensured that the death throes were short and dramatic. This argument is put forward by both Geoff Andrews and John Callaghan in their contributions to the series on the history of the Party published by Lawrence & Wishart.<sup>54</sup>

Ramelson did not accept any part of this analysis. In his view the Party's contribution was important and distinctive. It supplied the working-class movement with a realistic revolutionary strategy and Marxist perspective, which provided an understanding of how society worked, at home and internationally. It was linked with a vast international movement giving it the knowledge and experience other sections of the labour movement did not have, and enabling it to play an important role in the anti-colonial movement and in anti-imperialist solidarity work. Despite its small size it was able to sustain Britain's only socialist daily newspaper over the last sixty years of its existence, and to provide generations of activists with a political education which was often used to benefit the whole of the labour movement.<sup>55</sup> This is a formidable legacy to which Ramelson made a considerable contribution.

### *Analysing the decline of the Party*

A central question remained about the CP's failure to build on the industrial successes of the 1960s and 1970s in order to create a bigger, more influential organisation, and a stronger left movement in Britain. Above all the problem was that the Party failed to create a new generation of CP industrial activists, as Kelly sums up: 'it was failing to sustain its organisation at the union base. Contrary to some claims, this was not the inevitable by-product of the broad left strategy; rather it was a result of the Party's failure to recruit among young workers and to replenish its activist core'.<sup>56</sup> As McIlroy shows, however, this was not for the want of trying.<sup>57</sup>

The failure to recruit was partly due to the impact of the Cold War. As Ramelson observed in 1987: 'Anti-communist hysteria has been with us for four generations and it would be non-Marxist to believe

that anti-communism in the West has not struck deep roots in politics, ideology and consciousness'.<sup>58</sup> At the start of the 1960s it was the industrial activists who had been trained in the 1940s – before the Cold War had really taken hold – who were in influential positions. By the mid-1970s many of them were retired, past their best, or had become union full-time officials. The cold-war generation, who had been young workers in the 1950s, came into the movement at a time when the Party was isolated and vilified by the right wing. It is this 'lost generation' which was by the mid-1970s in shop floor leadership positions. Their experiences and attitudes were then passed onto younger activists, some of whom were attracted by the energies of the new left – as well as being repelled by some of the developments in Eastern and Central Europe.

As we have shown such a stream of misrepresentations had been well illustrated by Paul Foot's piece on the 1966 seaman's strike, in which, without a shred of evidence, he had accused Ramelson of advocating a return to work.<sup>59</sup> This was part of the ultra-left's argument that the CP was itself part of the reformism of the labour movement and was 'focused on bread and butter issues and on the union hierarchies at the expense of ideological struggle to make Marxists'.<sup>60</sup> There is, however, no evidence that the kind of strategy urged by the ultra-left – a more adventurist or syndicalist strategy, based mainly on rank-and-file struggle, with independent structures in opposition to the official movement – would have been any more successful as a means to build a revolutionary Party. On the contrary, the ultra-left groups which adopted such strategies were spectacularly unsuccessful industrially and made very little progress in recruiting to their own ranks.<sup>61</sup>

In fact the CP made every effort to 'make Marxists', through extensive Party literature and education programmes and it is unclear why there should be an assumed conflict between this and influencing union hierarchies. During these years the CP helped publish a daily newspaper which regularly included articles on Marxist theory, a fortnightly magazine *Comment*, with regular features of a theoretical nature, and a monthly theoretical journal *Marxism Today*. Industrial schools were also a regular feature of the Party's education work. Indeed, in his evidence to the Donovan Commission, respected trade union education specialist John Hughes stated: 'Communist Party "servicing" of its members, in the sense of provision of information,

education and training, has often been relatively efficient where much union servicing has been deficient'.<sup>62</sup> All of this 'servicing' had ideological content.

The reality is that the material and, more importantly, political conditions changed after 1979, with the election of Thatcher's right-wing Tory government, such that the balance of class forces moved sharply against the organised working class; and the union left were simply not strong enough to resist. The effects of deindustrialisation and mass unemployment were compounded by anti-union laws and a renewed iron-willed determination to defeat any major public sector strike; and the defeat of the miners in 1985 effectively put the lid on any possibility of an early union recovery. New Labour's response to this was to continue the strategy begun in the 1960s and 1970s, and to resolve that they too would marginalise union power – as was fully demonstrated, for example, during the 2002-4 fire fighters' dispute.<sup>63</sup> Initially, as Ramelson had fully expected, the industrial struggles of the 1960s and 1970s had brought with them political gains for the left, and the Labour Party had moved sharply to the left during the early 1980s. In the face of splits and electoral unpopularity, the Labour Party once more began to shift towards the right after the election of Neil Kinnock as leader in 1983.

At some stage in the mid-1970s Ramelson had probably expected to see a left Labour government in power during his lifetime, with a progressive programme that opened out possibilities for a socialist transition in the future. It was clear by the end of the 1980s that this was not going to happen. For Ramelson this was a serious setback but not a mortal blow to the cause of socialism: he remained convinced that socialism was the future for humankind, including the British people.

As well as the problems of the wider labour movement and left during the 1980s, the CP also had to face the development of a world crisis for the international communist movement. Ramelson's views on the overall failure of the Communist movement to sustain, let alone take forward, the advances that had been made in many parts of the world between 1945 and the late 1960s are not recorded at any length. However, it is clear from various contributions he made to seminars and discussion groups at the *World Marxist Review*, that he attributed great importance to subjective factors in producing this failure; in general he argued against regarding objective factors – such

as changes within the working class and production methods in the capitalist world – as the catalyst for communist decline. For Ramelson the working class was always in a state of change, but one fundamental remained unchanged – *relations* of production within capitalism would ensure that workers remained exploited economically and oppressed politically. The failure of the existing socialist countries to realise their potential, and the tenacity and strength of the capitalist world in spite of its regular economic crises, had led to frustration, disappointment and impatience in Communist ranks: ‘The truth is that we have tended to underestimate capitalism’s capacity to adapt to the chronic crisis ... while overrating our expectations of the speed with which socialism would spread its influence’.<sup>64</sup> In reaction to these developments many people, particularly but not exclusively those newer to the movement or from non-working class backgrounds and experiences, started to call into question basic Marxist-Leninist precepts and categories. This in turn led to enervating discussions within the international communist movement, presaging organisational splits, electoral decline and a weakening of its working-class base.

It is now also clear that Ramelson had by the late 1980s come to the view that ‘actual existing socialism’ was not socialism at all. He had already in previous years recognised the failure of the Soviet Union to extend democratic liberties and create opportunities for the people to control their working, social and cultural lives, but he had also argued that the commanding heights of the economy were in public ownership, a fundamental feature of any society calling itself socialist. During the 1980s the doubts of previous years began to multiply. He saw that in country after country, the ruling CP had lost touch with the people and that when challenges arose it was unable to mobilise its members – let alone the masses – in defence of the cultural and social gains that had been made over several decades. The experiences and habits of a lifetime had to be re-evaluated in the light of these developments. While the Soviet Union in Gorbachev’s time remained in the broadest terms a progressive force on the international stage, it was no longer a reliable ally in the struggle against imperialism, nor a champion of socialism as a world system. Many of the pressing reasons for Communist defence of the Soviet Union against ideological and political attacks were long gone. Very soon afterwards they were to become matters for historical analysis rather

than current political discourse, as the Soviet Union collapsed and a form of unregulated and frequently criminal capitalism spread rapidly across the former Socialist Republics. In all of this China was seen as of growing importance for the world communist movement, but Ramelson like many other comrades in Europe, made few references to Chinese developments and showed little interest in Chinese communism at the time.

### ***Some critics***

David Purdy was probably the most consistent and persistent critic of Ramelson's economic and political strategy. Purdy argued for a socialist incomes policy as part of a democratically planned economy as the best way of advancing the living standards of working people and opening up possibilities for revolutionary change.<sup>65</sup> His argument was that this project, which was consistent with the approach advocated at the time by senior trade union figures such as Jack Jones, Hugh Scanlon and Lawrence Daly, could force the Labour leadership to the left. It would enable the labour movement as a whole to present itself as the leading force in a broad democratic alliance of objectively anti-capitalist class and social interests.

Ramelson strongly disagreed with this approach, arguing that it was essentially 'pie in the sky', since at the time Labour's leadership was interested only in wages control, not in democratic planning to challenge capitalist interests; and that in these circumstances any form of incomes policy would disarm the working class. What is more, argued Ramelson, the rank-and-file movement simply would not accept wage restraint over any extended period, so that even if it was desirable (which it was not), a 'socialist incomes policy' was not sustainable, because it would not command mass support. Of course in different circumstances – with a left Labour government seen to be actively pursuing policies undermining capitalist interests and transferring wealth and power to working people – it might be possible to agree an approach on wages that preserved normal collective bargaining but in reaching wage settlements took into account the government's policies.

Despite their differences, Purdy seems to have respected Ramelson personally and enjoyed the cut and thrust of the debate on the Party's Economic Committee while Ramelson was its Chairman. He also

made comments about Ramelson and the norms of communist democracy that appear quite wrong-headed, including the claim that Ramelson committed the 'egregious' sin of censorship when he convinced the Party leadership in 1976 not to publish a text that had been drawn up by the members of the Economic Advisory Committee. As Purdy explains, 'The main reason for cancelling the project was that the chapter dealing with the economics of State monopoly capitalism expressed views on the causes of inflation and the need for an incomes policy which were at odds with the official Party line'.<sup>66</sup> It is, however, hardly surprising that a pamphlet critical of the Party's approach to one of the most important issues of the time should have been denied its approval and resources.

Andrews claims that in the Party's Economic Committee the intellectuals and industrial and political leaders were constantly at loggerheads. He goes on to argue, correctly, that there was substantial support for incomes policy on the committee and arguably majority support. In fact the argument was much more nuanced than this. For example, academics such as Ron Bellamy and Ben Fine strongly supported Ramelson's position of total opposition to government imposed incomes policy. Furthermore, the Economic Committee was not there to make Party policy. It was an Advisory Committee, whose attendance was by invitation and extremely variable. In this context, to talk of majority support is irrelevant. What mattered was the position adopted by the Executive Committee, and to suggest that the Party's refusal to publish a textbook consisting of a series of contributions arguing against Party policy was an act of censorship rather than political judgement shows how far Andrews and Purdy are from understanding normal democratic practices or the political culture of the communist movement.<sup>67</sup>

Writing in 1995, Andrews portrayed Ramelson as a member of the old guard of what in his view was by the 1970s a moribund Party. He puts Ramelson in the same camp as McLennan and Falber, and claims that together these comrades had 'presided over an internalised culture of decline and routinism which in its own logic could justify the freezing out of invention'.<sup>68</sup> For the sake of accuracy it is important to note that Ramelson had retired from the Party leadership at the 1977 Congress, and the 'old guard' still in the leadership in the 1980s included people like George Matthews, who by the end of the 1970s was very much in the camp of the 'reformers'. McLennan too, though

his position was more complicated, by the end of the 1970s was totally supportive of the *Marxism Today* tendency. Thus it is clear that the alleged division between the old guard and the 'young Turks' does not bear serious scrutiny. Indeed there were many intellectuals of similar vintage to Martin Jacques who strongly opposed the *Marxism Today* 'inventors'.<sup>69</sup> In fact Ramelson had an appetite second to none for debate, the clash of opinions and the development of theory, and he is the last person that could be accused of 'routinism'. If new ideas were good ideas he welcomed them, but he fought bad ideas and bad inventions with a great ferocity. Not for him the calculation of political advantage nor the need to lie low in case a potential future ally was lost. To those who knew him Ramelson was the antithesis of Dennis Healey's Comintern official and Andrews' servant of the Party machine (see p15).

At a conference organised by the Democratic Left in 2000, its secretary, Nina Temple, made a scathing attack on Ramelson's work for the communist movement.<sup>70</sup> She claimed that Ramelson's period as industrial organiser was 'dedicated to the creation of a manipulative, secretive and bureaucratic machine'; and that the industrial department had been operating as a secretive Leninist organisation, with its industrial organisers being more interested in keeping in touch with the officials of the hierarchy of the union movement than in attempting to win large numbers of ordinary trade unionists to new positions. This attack was totally baseless: Ramelson wrote countless pamphlets and articles addressed to 'ordinary trade unionists', attempting to win them to new positions. He was always available to speak at public meetings and always preferred to meet – on a one-to-one or group basis – rank-and-file activists. Where necessary he openly challenged and criticised union leaders both of the right and the left. *Needs of the Hour* was drawn up after consultation with industrial advisory elected officials and with CP Heads of Department. Time and time again Ramelson returned to the need to build rank-and-file unity, broad left organisation and activity, and CP workplace branches. These were in Ramelson's eyes complementary and linked activities.

Temple's line of argument can be seen as representative of the neo-Gramscian attack on established Party policy and practice. These matters were never raised openly, least of all at Party Congresses in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed the Party was proud of its industrial work and its achievements in mobilising struggle, advancing left policies in

the movement and building broad left organisation at rank-and-file level. Thus at the July 1977 EC, when it had become clear that union conferences had rejected the Social Contract, General Secretary McLennan proclaimed: 'This is a great victory for the working class movement. We are immensely proud of what we have done along with others on the left to bring it about'.<sup>71</sup>

In essence the neo-Gramscians wanted the industrial department to concentrate on party building, at the expense of attempting to work alongside others on the left to mobilise mass struggle and change union and Labour Party policy. In particular, national organiser Dave Cook had argued that the Party's workplace branches should come under the aegis of the industrial department rather than that of the organisation department. Ramelson had an entirely different view: it was the job of the Districts and local branches to nurture existing and build new factory branches, and it was impossible to do this from national headquarters even if it were given extra resources within the range of possibilities available to a small party. Ramelson worked tirelessly to increase the Party's influence, but he realised that this was inextricably linked to the development of left policies and socialist ideas in the broad labour movement. The British Party could not build socialism on its own; and neither should it try. In the end the neo-Gramscians fell between every possible stool. On their watch during the 1980s the Party's influence quickly dwindled in the labour movement, and wider civil society was oblivious to the Party's presence once its industrial base had gone.

### ***Ramelson's socialist vision***

Monty Meth's funeral oration described Ramelson as the most important figure to emerge from the Yorkshire labour movement since the war. Gordon McLennan in his interview with Rachel Seifert acknowledged that in the collective national communist leadership of the 1960s Ramelson had made the biggest all-round contribution. His knowledge and involvement spread far wider than trade union and labour movement politics and he was acknowledged as an authority on many international issues. He could more than hold his own in any forum on a wide range of topics, including complex theoretical issues related to developments within Marxism. In Geoffrey Goodman's assessment, in any small discussion group of labour movement leaders during the

1960s and 1970s Ramelson's voice would have been the clearest and most authoritative. From this, and from all that we know about his political practice, it is reasonable to conclude that Ramelson was – as Bill Moore put it – Britain's leading communist for at least two decades. He was a man of total integrity who was absolutely committed to the struggle to build socialism in Britain as part of a better world for humankind. As we have seen, in some respects he died a disappointed man.

It is clear that most of the world-shattering developments of the late 1980s and early 1990s were totally outside of Ramelson's field of influence – and that of the British communist movement as a whole. The breaking up of the Soviet Union, the unification of Germany within the NATO alliance and the ending of Communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe clearly affected the morale of British communists and their status in the wider labour movement. Life would never be the same for the Communist movement. As far as Britain was concerned, Ramelson remained convinced that a socialist revolution was necessary to release the creative potential of the people while guaranteeing social and economic rights for all; and that such a revolution was achievable given the growth of a revolutionary party and the unity of anti-capitalist forces. He thought that these preconditions could best be realised through the affiliation of the CP to a genuinely federal Labour Party, which presupposed a long campaign to transform the political orientation of the trade union movement.<sup>72</sup>

Whilst he was opposed to the split in Communist ranks when it occurred, the Communist Party of Britain has tried to continue with a Ramelsonesque set of policies and strategies, and by and large adopted the *British Road to Socialism* that he did much to fashion over four decades. While all trace of the neo-Gramscians as an organised force has gone, yet *The Morning Star*, the paper that they battled bitterly and unsuccessfully to control remains as a daily expression of the political tradition that they tried to destroy. Bert Ramelson, who saw every struggle against capitalist injustice as a victory, would have taken quiet satisfaction in the fact that the *Morning Star* remains a living voice for peace and socialism long after those responsible for the Party's dissolution have left the political stage.

To the end Ramelson remained an optimist, with a materialist outlook on historical development. He saw how human society had progressed over the centuries and how generations of the dispossessed had fought to obtain economic security and democratic rights.

Problems had been confronted and overcome in the search for a better life. Ramelson saw no reason to doubt that such progress would continue, although he recognised that there would be many a setback along the way. In late 1986 he looked back and observed:

Not very long ago the Communists believed that the twentieth century would be one of world-wide triumph for socialism. It is now clear that, however great the revolutionaries' natural desire to bring on the hour of victory, this goal has receded into a more distant future. The truth is that we tended to underestimate capitalism's capacity to adapt to the chronic crisis, and its viability, while over-rating our expectations of the speed with which socialism would spread its influence.<sup>73</sup>

In Ramelson's view the big challenges facing late twentieth-century humankind – including environmental sustainability, eliminating mass poverty in all its forms, securing world peace, and developing people's rights – could only be successfully tackled by socialist means. Imperialist oppression and capitalist exploitation were at the root of the problems and had no part to play in the solutions. In the end, rationality demanded that mankind take the co-operative road rather than a path that led to a future of conflict and uncontrollable market forces. In the end, Ramelson argued, rationality would triumph, if only because the people's struggles for economic and social justice will be too powerful to resist. Bert Ramelson's life was dedicated to this struggle.

## NOTES

1. Ethel Shepherd interview, 2009.
2. Levy, H. *Jews and the National Question*, Hillway, London 1958.
3. Ramelson, B. Review of Levy's book, *Daily Worker*, 11/3/58.
4. Ramelson, B. 'An old problem re-discussed', *Marxism Today*, January 1959, pp. 21-27.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. CP Archives: CP/IND/RAM/02/05.
7. Ramelson, B. *The Middle East Crisis*, CP 1967, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Wages were half the average industrial male wage.
11. Roger Bagley interview, 2010.