



Born in the labour movement

Eric Heffer MP spoke to John Bloxam and John O'Mahony about his life, struggles and ideas. This is part one of an interview to be continued in the next issue of *Workers' Liberty*.

We turned up, slightly late, on a Thursday morning to meet Eric Heffer in the Central Lobby at Westminster. Heffer took us across the vast, empty, echoing St Stephen's Hall — where a plaque on the floor tells you that Charles Stuart, the king defeated by Parliament and then behead-

ed, sat there during his trial and condemnation in January 1649 — to a Committee Room off a corridor decorated with drawings of old parliamentarian heroes, men like Oliver Cromwell, Charles Stuart's conqueror.

The walls of the Committee Room too are decorated with portraits. One is of Viscount Castlereagh, a man prominent in the savage repression of all popular movements during the reaction produced by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. It was of him that the poet Shelley wrote after the "Peterloo" massacre of 1819, when peaceful demonstrators in Manchester demanding reform were hacked down by the yeomanry:

I met death upon the way

He had a face like Castlereagh.

In fact, to judge by his portrait, Castlereagh had a pleasant enough face. A

bit like the face the British ruling class presents to Labour MPs, perhaps, the face which ensnares, cajoles, flatters and seduces so many of them.

And Eric Heffer, too, some of the "anti-parliamentarians" on the ultra-left will tell you, pointing with scorn to the title of his book of 20 years ago, 'The Class Struggle in Parliament'. Now it is true that Eric Heffer has the air of a man at home in Westminster — he has been there 24 years now — and you can walk past the former Tory Prime Minister Lord Home in Heffer's company and find them exchanging friendly first name greetings. But it's not true that Heffer has sold out or been seduced. After a quarter century in what Lenin on a sightseeing trip at the turn of the century pointedly referred to as "their parliament", Heffer is still a man who knows himself to represent the dispossessed and exploited class in the citadel of

their oppressors, the fortress of those who rose up by dispossessing them.

He is still a radical socialist. He is still not entirely convinced — after 24 years — that fundamental social change can be brought about through Parliament. He is still vigorously committed to fighting the class struggle on the streets and on the picket line.

Heffer and Tony Benn went down to Dover to stand on the seafarers' picket line. Last May Eric Heffer said this about the NUS battle with the P&O bosses:

"The state machine is rolling in to back the employers against the workers. That is what the law is designed to do. It is such open class law that workers now have no alternative, if they want to defend themselves, but to break it. Everywhere workers turn now, they come up against the law...."

"The whole machinery of the trade union movement must move into action to build solidarity with the men and women who now stand in the front line of the war to defend the labour movement. If it means things like cutting off supplies, then trade unionists should be prepared to do it. Other workers must help on the NUS picket lines."

Is this the voice — speaking out clearly in the middle of a major working class

struggle — of someone who has been hypnotised by Parliament?

Heffer is the foremost voice — in truth there is little competition — putting a broadly marxist point of view in the House of Commons: a consistent marxist view, for Heffer doesn't just side with British workers and with the workers in capitalist hell holes like Chile and South Africa, concerning which the left has no difficulty in taking sides; he is sharply distinguished from most of the left by his consistent support for the working class in the Stalinist states against their rulers. You could quarrel with him and disagree on some points, but it would be a dispute within the general framework of marxist politics and economics. Yet Heffer is also a practising Anglican, and seemingly a devout one.

Eric Heffer told us about his early life and how his outlook on the world was formed.

I was born into the labour movement. Not that my parents were active members of the Labour Party, but they never voted anything other than Labour.

Politics was discussed in my house all the time, and it was always left wing Labour politics. On Sundays, we had 'Reynolds News' coming into the house, a very good left wing newspaper, and took the 'News Chronicle'. And from time to time my father used to buy other left-wing papers.

My brother was a socialist — my elder brother who died when he was 21.

So I came from a working class background. I left school at 14 and became an apprentice carpenter-joiner in a very small country town just outside London, Hertford. My father had been a professional soldier. He ran away from home when he was a boy, served in the army for many years. He came out of the army and joined the police force, but he couldn't stand it and left the police. Then he was called up when World War 1 broke out and he was back in the army. He was, believe it or not, a serjeant-major. But despite all that he was a good socialist — that is the interesting thing, and it's quite a contradiction, I suppose, but he was a believer in left-wing ideas. He had had associations with the marxist Social-Democratic Federation as a young man in the army.

My mother was a professional cook, she had worked in the homes of aristocratic families, starting off as a scullery maid, ending up as a cook. She always used to say to me "I'd never curtsy, didn't believe in curtsying, they weren't any better than us, and I didn't see any reason why we should curtsy to them". My mother was quite involved in Church of England affairs, but she was also a very active member of the co-operative women's guild.

So I came from a traditional sort of working class background, but with a clear bias towards the labour movement and towards the socialist ideas.

It would have been in 1936 I began my apprenticeship. Almost as soon as the apprenticeship was over, a matter of months, I was called up and I spent four years

in the Royal Air Force, until 1945. By the time I went back to my 'trade' I had met my wife, who is from Liverpool, where I had been stationed for a while.

I had joined the Labour Party as a youngster when I joined the union, but then I left the Labour Party for the Communist Party because I didn't think the Labour Party was strong enough, active enough, or socialist enough. Labour was not supporting the struggle against Fascism as I thought it should be supporting it.

I didn't think they were supporting the struggle in Spain where fascists and anti-fascists were fighting a civil war. Spain was a very important question when I was fairly young. My brother was always on about Spain, and all the political people who used to come to the house would talk about what was happening there and how it was vital to support the Spanish government against Franco and so on. These were everyday household discussions.

But I don't think there was an understanding of the conflicts within the Spanish Republican camp. I don't think, for example, that we understood what was happening to the POUM, the left wing party which the Stalinists suppressed and denounced as 'Trotsky-Fascist'. At the time the important thing was to mobilise everybody to support the Spanish Republican forces, fighting against Franco's fascists.

Not that my father was ever a member of the Communist Party. In fact, when I joined the Communist Party he had a word with me about it, but in the end he said: 'you must do what you think is right. If you think it's right to join the Communist Party, join the Communist Party. You'll learn, you'll learn. It's no good me telling you now. In a few years time you'll know that you were wrong to join the Communist Party'. Of course I didn't listen, but I did learn.

My first inking that things were wrong in the Communist Party came during the general election in 1945. It happened like this. I hadn't kept up with all the Party's theoretical journals, though I read Party papers when I could get them, and I didn't know that the 'Party line' was for a new Labour-Tory coalition government.

I was stationed just outside Banbury on one of the air bases there, and we used to go to all the meetings of the Tory candidate who was MP for the area and heckle. All the lads would go. It was amazing how many of the servicemen used to turn up at these meetings. You could see these Tories quailing when they saw a crowd of servicemen arrive, because they knew they were going to have a rough time.

A chap called Brian Roach was the Labour candidate. He had been an International Brigader in Spain, a left wing Labour man. They needed somebody to speak on the eve of poll, to help keep it going until the candidate arrived because he was doing a series of meetings and would get there late, and they asked me if I would speak. I said: 'I'm in uniform, I can't speak in uniform'. They said: 'we'll

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Forward to socialism



by Eric Heffer MP

with a foreword by Tony Benn MP

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give you a civilian suit'. I said: 'OK, but we'll have to be careful because I'll be breaking the law'. So they gave me this suit which was far too small — I was a tall lanky young fellow and the sleeves came half way up my arms and the trouser legs way above the shoes!

It was a packed meeting and there was tremendous enthusiasm — we nearly won Banbury. I started off my speech by attacking the Conservatives for imagining that the war had been won by one man, Winston Churchill. I asked: 'What have the rest of us been doing?' I then talked in favour of a Labour government that would begin to transform society to socialism, saying that we had to concern ourselves first with the interests of the working class. It brought the roof down.

But afterwards this bloke came up to me and said: 'I understand, comrade, you're a member of my party — I am a member of the Communist Party and I have been told you're a member of the Party', and I said: 'yes, I don't deny it'. He said: 'you haven't quite understood the line, comrade, you see the Party has reluctantly come to support the Labour Party in this election, but what we really wanted was a government of national unity, which would include progressive Tories like Churchill and Eden', and I said: 'you must be joking comrade, you really must'. He said: 'Oh no I'm not, I will give you some of the Party documents, which maybe you haven't seen'.

So he did give me those documents and they made my hair stand on end. It was the stuff that was coming out at the time — for "national governments" everywhere in Europe supported by or involving the Communist Party. In Britain it was so silly!

In some parts of Europe there might have been an argument for the Communists to try and get in on the government at that stage, but in Britain it was ridiculous. You either had a Labour government or a Tory government. The idea that you had a government of national unity was simply ridiculous.

I got discharged from the forces then under what they called B release, which meant you could come out there and then or risk being sent to Japan, and I reckoned four years was enough in His Majesty's Forces. I went back to my trade in the construction industry, building temporary houses in Hertford.

I got married. I'd met Doris at a Young Communist Party meeting in Liverpool during the war, when I was asked to speak to them about 'What is Marxism'. Of course, in those days you considered yourself knowledgeable about everything, so I went along.

Then I helped to create a Communist Party in Hertford. I stood as a candidate for the Communist Party in the municipal elections, and I nearly won, losing by only a handful of votes.

But now I began to read seriously — Lenin and the theoretical works of Marx and Engels and, of course, like all good Communists in those days I read Stalin — 'The History of the CPSU' and so on. But

I studied Lenin in particular — 'Left-Wing Communism', 'State and Revolution' — I'd had his twelve volumes of 'Selected Works' before the war but I hadn't read them. Now I read them and they led me to the view that the policies of the Communist Party at that time were not really communist.

There was a chap called Frank Roy, who when he was at Oxford had recruited the poet C. Day-Lewis into the Communist Party. We had long discussions.

The Welwyn Garden City branch and Hertford came out strongly against the drift in policy. We put down resolutions to the Party Conference.

We were of course attacked very strongly. I think they decided that I was to be eased out of the Party.

But before they got to that in Hertford I had gone to live in Liverpool. We couldn't find anywhere of our own to live in Hertford, so we had to live with my parents

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and that was very unsatisfactory. And Doris was also getting fed up with being in a small town. She was used to being in a big city — was born and bred in one — so we went to live in Liverpool. And then I started work on the line of docks, ship-repairing, with a friend of mine, a joiner, who was also a member of the Communist Party.

We had a big strike of ship repair workers in 1947. There were 12-13000 of us out for 6 weeks. Of course there were a lot of disputes. The seamen had unofficial strikes. The dockers struck from time to time. It was a tremendous feeling.

The Communist Party was then against strikes! Strikes, they said, were 'undermining the Labour government'. We argued: 'this is ridiculous. The class struggle has not stopped just because you have got a Labour government, they have not got rid of the class power that runs this country. The ruling class is still there, the working class has still got to struggle'. So we had this great, continuing argument...

I was in a minority in the Liverpool CP but there were a few who supported me. Eventually I was expelled. Not by the ship repair branch that I was in, but by the District Committee on the instructions of the Central Committee. They called me to a meeting by telegram. It came in the morning and in the evening I rushed down there, and they told me. The ship repair workers were furious about it. Here was a comrade they knew, had worked with, been on strike with, who had been on the

strike committee — a man clearly dedicated to the movement and the struggle. There was a lot of argument, but they were instructed. There was no vote on it, just 'that's it'. And I was out, on charges of 'anti-Party activity' and of being a 'Trotskyite'.

I had encountered Trotskyists when I was still in Hertford. Because of my stand at the CP Congress, who should appear on the door step one day but Ted Grant, of today's Militant Tendency, with a bundle of Trotsky's books under his arm. I was always a friendly sort of chap, so I let him into the house and we talked. He showed me copies of the journal they were producing at the time, 'Socialist Appeal'. He gave me a copy of Trotsky's 'Transitional Programme' and lent me these books by Trotsky. I read them and I found I did not agree with all of them.

For example, when Trotsky argued about the militarisation of the trade unions I did not agree with that, and I told Grant that. I thought that was wrong, whether you were in a socialised economy or not you could not have the militarisation of the unions. Trotsky did not argue that after 1921 but he argued it before — I did not agree with that. And I did not agree with his defence of the shooting of the seamen at Kronstadt either.

I told Grant there was a lot I did agree with Trotsky on because it was in line with what I had been reading in Lenin, but I did not agree with these two points and there were other things I was not entirely happy with. So we had a nice discussion but that was the end of it.

I never did become a Trotskyist at any time. Never an anti-Trotskyist but never a Trotskyist. Certainly I became anti-Stalin later — but, then, I was just learning about Stalin. At that stage, when I was thrown out of the Communist Party, I wasn't anti-Stalin, though I was beginning to be more critical.

So I was expelled from the CP. Then they discovered that Doris was still a member of the Party, so they asked her to go down to the Party office. She was interviewed by Sid Foster, who was the District Secretary of the Communist Party on Merseyside — he was also a joiner by trade — and Foster said she would have to make up her mind: she would either have to cease 'associating' with 'an anti-Party element' or she would have to leave the Party.

She said: 'are you telling me that I have got to leave my husband?', because that is what it sounded like. There was quite an argument and she eventually said: 'well, if you persist in this line then I will probably have to tell the capitalist press about what is happening'. Anyway they did not do any more about it. They did not expel her, they just did not renew her membership at the end of the year. In those days you had to re-register every year as a member of the Communist Party. They did not re-register her, so she was out. By then, she was quite happy to be out.

I remember going to one very big dance, a 'Daily Worker' dance, in St Georges Hall in Liverpool. Certain peo-

ple, because they were against my expulsion, were friendly but the rest — it was like walking into the ice box. There was one comrade who came right across the room and held his hand out and said: 'I'm not supposed to talk to you, but they can go to hell'. I always remember that because it was a great act of solidarity.

My mate always kept friendly, but he was so sickened by what happened he just went away and worked out of town. He went to Sellafield to work. But when he came back he found a job working with me, and we were mates again, despite the fact that I had been thrown out of the CP.

At the time they asked Doris to go into the office, I was working on the building of Bromborough Power Station and was the senior shop steward there — the federated steward for the entire site.

When Sid Foster said: 'you are associating with an anti-working class element', Doris replied: 'I'll tell you what you can do, why don't you call a meeting of all the workers on Bromborough Power Station and explain to them that their senior steward is anti-working class? They would throw you in the Mersey'. We had just had two great battles and won them.

There were some great industrial struggles in Liverpool and I was very much involved in all of them. And the mass of the CP working class membership were never really hostile. It was the bureaucracy and the more middle class element, I have to say, who were keeping their distance — not the working class element at all.

I was a delegate to the Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party, because I paid the political levy, from my union branch. After a bit it seemed to me that I might as well join the Labour Party. I thought: 'I am not going to join one of the small groups that remain outside the Labour Party — I am going to get in the Labour Party'.

The truth is, at that point in my political development, I didn't really know much about 'the groups' at all. I only really began to meet 'the groups' when I got into the Labour Party, for example: the forerunners of 'Militant', who had just come out of the recently collapsed RCP. I discovered that there were a number of other 'groups' — the people who later formed the Socialist Workers Party and the Healy group, which sold 'Socialist Outlook'.

But I never joined any of those groups. Never, at any stage, did I become involved in any of them.

After a number of years I got a bit fed up with things in the Labour Party — the rise of Gaitskell and the move to the right, and so on. I left. Looking back on it I was wrong. But, then, I felt that the time had come to begin to form a new party.

Together with Harry MacShane, who by then had come out of the Communist Party, and one or two other people in London, I helped form a group called the Socialist Workers Federation. That was in either 1953 or 1954. It lasted about two years. By then I realised that we were getting nowhere, and

old Harry realised that we were getting nowhere, so we decided to disband and go our own ways. We wound up the SWF and I became very active as an individual member of the Labour Party. I had never been out in a sense because I had been on the executive of the Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party. I had always paid my political levy, and in those days you did not have to be an individual member to be a delegate.

There was some argument about whether they would actually accept me back into my constituency but they did. And within a year I was chairman of the Toxteth Constituency Party, as well as being on the executive of the Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party. Then I began to be elected as delegate to the Lancashire Federation of Trades Councils and Labour Parties; got elected to the executive; got on to the Regional Council of the Labour Party. I was well and truly back!

I continued to be a shop steward in the ship yards and the big sites. Then, in 1960, I was pressurised by the left into standing for the council. I had never been interested in being a councillor, but I did stand and got elected, in Pirie in Walton, for a safe Labour seat. But we lost seats everywhere that day in Liverpool, and I only just won the seat by a handful of votes. When I stood 3 years later I won it again, with a 1750 majority.

Then there was a discussion about whether I should stand for Parliament. It had never crossed my mind to go for Parliament. I didn't really like the idea of parliamentary positions at all — again there was pressure from comrades in the Party. I said 'OK, I'll stand'. Then I had to come down here and be interviewed by the right wing Labour Party officers — Ray Gunther and company, Bessie Brad-dock, and others. I think it was touch and go whether I would be accepted as a Labour candidate. Finally, I just about got on. The truth of it was that I had been selected for a seat they thought could not be won. Walton was a Tory seat.

So I stood for selection, thinking I wouldn't get it. But I did — I got it on the first vote.

At the same time I stood for the Assistant General Secretary of my union, which was the ASW in those days, again under pressure from the left in the union. I came second. I got quite a lot of support in the big urban areas, but lost in the rural areas and Ireland. Not that I was terribly upset. I thought it much better playing a role at the local level.

So I was, you might say, pushed towards Westminster and, in October 1964, to Parliament. What did the new MP for Walton stand for?

Although I had been in the Communist Party, and later tried to form the Socialist Workers Federation, I'd had basically the same ideas since my early days when I first got involved in politics and joined the Labour Party. I had never really changed. I have — I hope — learnt quite a lot, but nothing I have learned in 50 years has changed me, or shifted me from the

socialist bedrock — the class struggle position. I believe that the whole idea is to transform and change society, to build a socialist society and that only in that way can the working class come into its own. Lots of people throw over the basic ideas they championed when young. I have never thrown them over. All I have ever done is to read a lot of interesting books from all sorts of angles and different points of view. My views have been modified here and there but, in the main, reading and experience have not weakened but strengthened the views I started out with, strengthened them.

I started off in the 1930s with the simple idea that the working class had to fight for their rights, that there was a class struggle going on and that you had to be involved in that class struggle. At first I thought you could do it through the Labour Party and then I thought you couldn't, and that the Communist Party was much more involved in the actual class struggle. I was of course beginning to read pamphlets, and Left Book Club books. It was pretty rudimentary — I hadn't read anything much in depth.

One of the books that did influence me — and, of course, at that time we had not got the full version, only an expurgated version — was the 'Ragged Trousered Philanthropist'. I remember reading that.

I read things like 'Red Skies Over Moscow' — I can't even remember who wrote it now... I was a voracious reader of the socialist works of the time. But I didn't read Orwell on Spain at that stage. Orwell was somebody you didn't read because, in a sense, he was on a proscribed list. You weren't encouraged to read Orwell and I had no particular reason to read him. It was either immediately after or during the period of being thrown out of the CP that I read 'Homage to Catalonia' and that had a tremendous impact on me.

After I was out of the CP I read everything I could get my hands on. Fenner Brockway, Trotsky, Bevan, all the historical stuff. In a sense it was a new world — I even read the anarchist documents on Spain and Richard's book — all that stuff, everything. A new world opened up because in the CP, although you were encouraged to participate in political discussion and to read, nevertheless it was narrowly guided reading. For example, it was only after I came out of the CP that I realised the tremendous part that John Maclean had played in Scotland during the World War and after. When I met Harry MacShane later — he had been one of Maclean's lieutenants — and he talked, it opened up a new world to me.

And you got a new view of the Soviet Union. It was clear to me that it wasn't the socialist millennium at all, and that the workers were as bureaucratically controlled — and more so, in some respects — than they were in capitalist Britain. Therefore a new revolution was necessary in the Soviet Union, and the fight for a revolution there was as important as in this country.