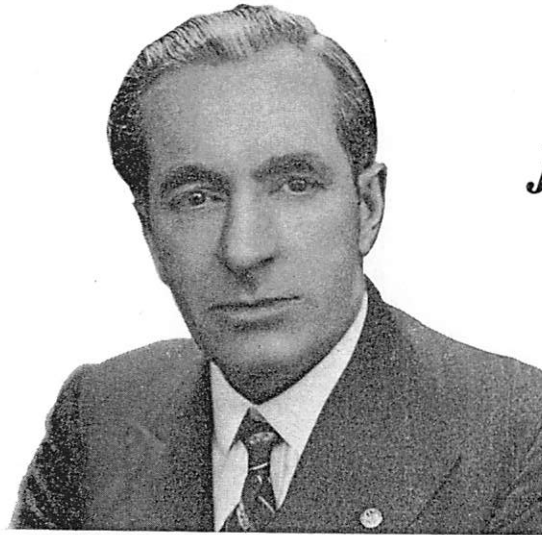


# SPANISH DIARY



*John McNair*

Edited and with a  
Commentary by  
Don Bateman

El compañero John McNair, es miembro de la Internacional  
Bureau for Revolutionary Socialist Unity y viene a España por una  
misión importante, y se ruega a todas las autoridades para que le  
den toda clase de facilidades.

El comisé.

Agosto 1936.



THE WORKERS' PASSPORT

40p

# SPANISH DIARY

*by*

*John McNair*

The front cover shows a reproduction of the "Workers' Passport" issued to John McNair at Figueras, the first town he visited after crossing the frontier from Perpignan into Spain.

It is endorsed with the stamp of each working class organisation with the notable exception of the Communist Party. At that stage of the Spanish War and the Revolution it was insignificant and not in evidence in this small town. It operated inside the United Socialist Party of Catalonia and manipulated its policies.

"Comrade John McNair is a member of the International Bureau For Revolutionary Socialist Unity and he visits Spain on an important mission; it is requested by all authorities that he be given every possible assistance."

*Edited and with a Commentary*

*by*

*Don Bateman*

## DEDICATION

This pamphlet is dedicated to the memory of Harry Hardcastle of Bristol ILP, whose death during its preparation was a great loss to us all. Harry's help was an important factor in making possible its publication. We hope that in a very small way it will act as a memorial to his memory, to that of his old friend John McNair and those other comrades now passed on: those who never scaled the heights of John McNair but were nonetheless the very life-blood of the ILP and the salt of the earth for the Labour Movement.

The publication of this pamphlet was not endorsed by the National Administrative Council of Independent Labour Publications. It is not an I.L.P. pamphlet but a publication produced by the Greater Manchester I.L.P. Branch.

## INTRODUCTION

John McNair was born in Boston, Lincolnshire in 1887. He died in the Tyneside which shaped his formative years, on February 18th 1968. Between these two events a life was spent in unique accomplishments, idealistic sacrifice and a vast panorama of human endeavour. McNair left school at thirteen to become an errand boy yet he had a successful commercial career in Paris for many years, was a fluent linguist, became General Secretary of the Independent Labour Party and a Parliamentary candidate; was an internationally-known figure in the Spanish Revolution and Spanish Civil War and in retirement at the age of 67, went back to his native Tyneside to take a degree at Durham University.

To those of us who had the rewarding experience of knowing him and counting him as a friend, this unfolding of a life enriched with unique talents was a relationship we shall never forget and one which deserves to be recorded. In this booklet we have reprinted his history of the Spanish Revolution and Civil War as he reported it at the time in diary notes, articles sent back to *The New Leader* and his pamphlets. Later in life he assembled these memories and they were reprinted in the *Socialist Leader* in 1974—the journal of the I.L.P. which was the successor to the original paper in which so many of his reports were printed. They form a graphic account of the events of the period and have been linked with a commentary which makes intelligible to the reader of today, events which John assumed were known by all forty years earlier.

Although McNair was born in Lincolnshire, his father, (of the same name) had come from Johnstone in Renfrewshire, having left a repressive and bigoted home at the age of nineteen. His Calvinist upbringing and original training for the Church did not deter him from alcohol which he used as a refuge from the acute poverty in which he struggled to raise a family. Marrying in Boston, his wife produced five boys, two of whom died in infancy and John McNair was the eldest. When he was three, the family poverty was so dire that he was packed off to Scotland to live with his grandparents, and the following year left deep imprints upon him. A rich Scots culture and love of learning was absorbed into the pores of his skin but the separation from his parents proved emotionally painful and an experience he never forgot. His father left Boston in search of work and (probably en route back to Scotland) settled in South Shields where he got a job as a brewer's drayman for a pound a week. The infant rejoined his mother and his family had a frugal but happy life.

After leaving school, the young McNair was attracted to socialism through the familiar route of Blatchford's *Merrie England* and *Britain for the British*, became an omnivorous reader and left his errand boy's job to become a 5/- a week clerk at the Wallsend Slipway and Engineering Co. Ltd. When nineteen he joined the I.L.P. and commenced his evangelistic cycling trips around the colliery villages as a missionary for the socialist cause. In the sixty years of hectic and enriching life which were to come, he never shed his original loyalty

and he never joined another political party.

In 1910 he went with a friend to work for Victor Grayson in the second "Colne Valley election" where he was billed as "the boy-orator from the North" and he spoke of Grayson at the time as having an aura of magic around him which made him "almost prophetic and apostolic". As a platform orator Grayson had no equal, but vanity and the high-life was his downfall, leading to excessive drinking.

Grayson had won a spectacular by-election victory in 1907 without official Labour support and as a candidate of the Colne Valley Labour League. At one election rally in Huddersfield, in 1910 McNair was intended to speak until the arrival of the candidate and when Grayson did not appear, he had to fill in the entire evening of a mass meeting. He acquitted himself well and held the audience single-handed. The meeting over, he went back-stage to ask what had happened to Victor Grayson only to find him slumped in a chair and so drunk as to be incoherent. Grayson lost the election and his seat and disappeared in a welter of speculation and rumour. John McNair felt the occasion very deeply, for his respect for and enchantment by Grayson never left him, but the anti-climax and the discovery that his God had feet of clay was a bitter blow to a young and idealistic lad. The next few months were to be spent in cycling around the North of England as a spare-time propagandist for the I.L.P. This was a role which he renewed again in 1939 but using an inadequate war-time rail service for the purpose.

In 1911 he went to Paris to work without a word of French. He had been employed by Alfred Herberts Ltd. who spotted something unique in this young man and sent him to France with their Agency there. It was an experience which re-moulded his life, for he immersed himself in music, the theatre, sport and the richest elements of Parisian life. One of his favourite stories (with which he often regaled us as young folk in the movement) was that of the 1914 jingo campaign which was waged against Jean Jaures and his assassination on the eve of war. McNair claimed to have been so near to the crime that he actually heard the revolver shots at 9.00 p.m. one evening. He failed his own medical for the army and spent part of the war not very far from the front lines of battle.

In the intervening years he became totally absorbed in French life and even acquired five French god-children from his wide circle of friends. Soccer being relatively new to France, he was looked upon as being something of authority and he certainly had a good knowledge of English aspects of the game. He became president of the Vesinet Club and helped to raise what was then a large sum of money for enclosing the ground and making it possible for them to move into higher leagues.

His business life changed, he felt that he was becoming too totally absorbed in French life and in 1923 he returned to England, reporting back to the I.L.P., his first love and one with which he had always retained contact. He had accumulated £3,000 in savings and with no matrimonial responsibilities, offered his services as a propagandist (on an unpaid basis) to Fenner Brockway and Clifford Allen. The I.L.P. in those days had 700 branches and 60,000 members and his offer was snapped-up by comrades who knew well his abilities. H. N. Brailsford

was editing the *Labour Leader* and a General Election was in the offing. Clifford Allen offered him £5 a week to become Organising Secretary at Head Office and he accepted the job. He worked hard in the General Election of 1924 and tired himself out by continuous speaking on public platforms. Old bronchial problems returned and his doctor told him to go back to France, partly for the climate and partly because he would work himself to death for the cause in Britain. He returned to Paris, spending the next twelve years there in commercial life, taking-up again the threads he had woven in his earlier spell.

He came back to England in 1936 and the story is told here in his own words. Spain, the revolution and the Franco Rebellion became his life and his relationship with George Orwell, Stafford Cottman, Bob Smillie and Bob Edwards has been recounted in "Homage to Catalonia".

When he returned to England (at which point this Diary closes) he became General Secretary of the I.L.P. and at the outbreak of war, evacuated Head Office to Glasgow. The premises in St. Bride Street, where Fenner Brockway edited the Party paper were bombed in the London fire-raids and John came back to open new offices in Finchley.

In 1955 he wrote the biography of his life-long hero and friend, Jimmy Maxton "Portrait of a Rebel" and it remains the only definitive work upon this unique Clydeside socialist. McNair then retired and returned home to his native North East where he finally graduated as a B.A. at 71. His tough resilience may be appreciated by the fact that in his third year he was knocked down by a car, sustaining three broken ribs, a collapsed lung and heavy bruising. Despite the obvious handicap he managed an Upper Second and obtained his Master's Degree at the age of 73 in 1960.

A little-known aspect of his life was his ability as a chess-player. When living at St. Albans he played regularly for Hertfordshire, for a short period captained the County Team and upon moving back to Newcastle in retirement, he played with renewed enthusiasm for both his local club and County Durham. Those of us who were so often roundly beaten by him listened with wonderment to his stories of encounters with the Grand Masters in Paris cafes. He had the ability of the born raconteur to provide enough poetic licence for lifting any story into the realm of magic.

John as an Anglo-French linguist was quite unique. When appearing on a platform at an international socialist gathering, or interpreting the fraternal greetings of a visiting speaker at an I.L.P. Conference or Summer School he enjoyed every minute of his performance . . . and the word is chosen with care. There was the obvious element of self-display by this working-class lad who could leave most of the savantes standing in the wings but he loved the task because deep-down he had a love-affair with language as a basic tool of mankind. His translations were instantaneous and fluent. I have never heard him hesitate over a word or a phrase. Those of us who enjoyed these operations over the years have often heard dull and pedestrian French (which would have driven any Parisian audience to sleep) rendered into mellifluous and elegant English prose which could almost bring an audience to its feet. He had used his years in Paris to exemplify the philosophy which should lie behind all linguistics: his absorption of French enhanced his English vocabulary and feeling for the use of words.

As a colleague of mine remarked "The first essential for making a good speech at any Conference is to get John McNair as your interpreter". He kept his French in good repair by his annual forays to Paris where he acted as Examiner for the London Chamber of Commerce in their spoken language sessions and rarely could one find him in any way wanting in his appreciation of the current French literary scene. I have known him write literary book reviews in both languages, for French and English journals, in the same half-day session. He was a fluent and explicit writer of political pamphlets and articles or literary criticism. His initial research completed he could sit down and produce two thousand words at remarkable speed and such was his command of expression, that few alterations would be made in the final draft. The polishing and re-polishing of prose by writers is sometimes a straining after effect, or an attitude of chronic indecision. His political life had given him little time for literary effect for its own sake, but he managed to combine a simple and functional prose with a vocabulary which was unique in its range and felicitous in style. Much of this he had developed from his absorption in the school of English romantic poets. His lectures on Byron, Shelley and Keats were incredible displays of analysis and feats of memory. I first heard some of these during the Second World War at a Weekend School in Leeds and to me he epitomised all that was rich in working-class self-education. Occasionally at I.L.P. Summer Schools in formal lectures we would receive a taste of this aspect of his life, but it was a delight to get him with a circle of friends in the evening after a session at a Summer School or Annual Conference where he would drink a glass of wine and entrance the company with rich conversation. He was in regular demand as a lecturer to literary societies and filled his life with warm encounters and rich friendships. His political pamphlets had all the imagery of the public platform and much of his work was written exactly as he orated. The secret of this lay in his remarkable memory which enabled him to write a pamphlet or an article, and then recite it with great drama from the public platform. A good example is the pamphlet he wrote for the I.L.P. *In Spain Now*, upon his return from his first mission to Spain as a representative of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Socialist Unity to which the I.L.P. was affiliated and of which Fenner Brockway was Secretary. "As I commence writing this pamphlet, I learn that the defences of Irun have been forced and that the town lies at the mercy of the fascists. At the mercy of the fascists! A vision of a second and more terrible Badajoz dims my eyes. The sweet city between the mountains and the sea may even now be a charnel house of horror and destruction . . . It is very quiet here in this peaceful London square. The streets of Irun may now be echoing to the last moans of the massacred workers. Chatham aroused England when he said that the indignities perpetrated during the American War of Independence filled him with 'decisive indignation'. 'Such proceeds' he said 'are equally abhorrent to God and Nature'. The spectacle before the eyes of the civilised world today is worse, a thousand times worse.

"The horror of Badajoz blackens all the white radiance of human aspiration."

This was a penny pamphlet with a mass circulation and his ability to lift the intellectual level of working class readers and listeners may be judged by these opening paragraphs.

When the Franco uprising took place in Spain on July 18 1936 the I.L.P. was a small Party sadly in debt and without any kind of financial reserves. The National Administrative Council of the Party met at their Summer School in Letchworth and asked John McNair to make an immediate visit to Spain in order to report upon the situation. So that help could be given to their Spanish comrades they ran a series of public meetings at which the main speakers were the M.P.'s (Jimmy Maxton, John McGovern, Campbell Stephen) along with Fenner Brockway, Bob Edwards and McNair himself. Urgent appeals for donations were sent out to all I.L.P. Branches and by scraping the bottom of the barrel something like £500 was raised . . . a large sum by the standards of 1936. McNair took the money in currency notes, for the N.A.C. did not trust any bank to dispatch the money to the desired recipients in the confused atmosphere of the Civil War.

John McNair set out for Barcelona and he now takes up the narrative himself.  
D.B.

## 2

## INTO SPAIN

In passing through Paris I called on my old friend, Marceau Pivert, who was attached to the French Foreign Office in the Leon Blum Government and spent a day or two with him. His Party, the French S.F.I.O., was as enthusiastic as we in its support of the Spanish workers, and I got a lot of useful information. He gave me full and immediate facilities to get down to Perpignan, just north of the Spanish frontier, and a note of introduction to the Franco-Spanish Committee which was operating there. I naturally told him the nature of my visit.

I had a terribly hot journey. When I arrived at Perpignan about two in the afternoon of the following day it was 100 degrees in the shade and I lay gasping in the station waiting room until a taxi arrived to take me to the Bar de la Republique, the headquarters of the committee. When I got there they were all having their siestas so I simply dozed about till four o'clock when there were signs of movement.

I approached the proprietor and handed him my letter from Marceau. When he read it, he beamed and said I must have a bottle of wine with him. I did not quite see the connection and told him it was too hot for wine and I wanted to get to Barcelona that night if possible. Helping himself to a glass of red and looking rather reproachfully at me, he said he would attend to the transport if I would wait "un petit moment."

The moment was only a couple of hours, and two great, hefty militia men came in and said cheerfully: "Ah, you will be the English comrade with the money!" I said, "Sh . . ." But they only grinned. "Oh, we all know all about it, and we have a car outside waiting to take you to Barcelona." I had no idea who these good fellows were but was re-assured when they took me to an inner room, being used as an office, and I was given my temporary permit, I had my British

passport but it was not recognised in Spain at that time. We were ready to leave at seven and it was already almost dark, but they had to finish their bottle of red (this time I helped, to save time), to shake hands all round two or three times, to go and find some more petrol, but we finally managed to get away from Perpignan at half-past seven. The car was a powerful Hispano-Suiza and I think they wanted to show me its paces. We were stopped at Figueras and Gerona by the militia but immediately allowed to proceed, and when we got right into Catalonia there were military road blocks every 10 kilometres. We arrived safely in Barcelona at midnight.

Barcelona was as busy as London or Paris at theatre closing time. Great amplifiers were blaring forth "Sons of the People" (the Syndicalist marching song) and "The International," interspersed with other songs. I was taken down the Ramblas to the Place Christopher Columbus where the Executive Committee of the P.O.U.M.—our brother Party in Spain—was meeting. I was ushered into a room where I met, among others, Andres Nin, Julien Gorkin, Pierre Bonet and Dino Moulines, all of whom became my friends.

They all understood French and my welcome was enthusiastic. To prove my *bona-fides* I said a few words and emptied my pockets of the banknotes which had been a nightmare to me during all my travel. My welcome then became even warmer!

I had the satisfaction of being the first representative of any section of the British working class to take tangible assistance to our Spanish friends. I remember saying to them, "I'm sorry the money is in British banknotes, but we thought it better to bring it in this form." They replied, "British notes are at a premium, this is just what we want."

"Well," said I, "every penny of it has been freely given by our members and friends . . ."

They were deeply moved and Andres Nin said: "If the British and French governments were actuated by the same spirit we should crush Spanish Fascism in three months." At that time, and indeed during the whole Spanish struggle, the British and French government took refuge in the pact of non-intervention. This was against all international practice. The Spanish Republican Government had been duly elected by the people of Spain in spite of opposition of the Army and the greater part of the Church, and it had been attacked by the Army junta, headed by Franco and Mola who imported thirty thousand Moorish troops. When the Government tried to defend itself by buying arms and even food, Britain and France refused to supply them.

During this time the German and Italian governments were giving free assistance and supplying planes and pilots to Franco who exercised their prowess in many parts of Spain and eight months later on the terrible massacre at Guernica and Madrid. The only supplies the Republicans got were a few planes and supplies which they bought with gold from Russia, and some little assistance from that small, poor country, Mexico.

That night I was given a bed at the Hotel Falcon. The heat was terrific—over 90 degrees in the middle of the night. I could not sleep in bed and went into a bathroom and lay on the cool floor with a couple of pillows. I made the bathroom my bedroom during my stay, much to the amusement of my Spanish friends.

During my first stay of a fortnight I examined the whole position and attempted to get an objective view. The forces in presence were as follows:

On the Republican side—

The C.N.T. (Confederation Nacional del Trabajo—the Anarcho-Syndicalists)

The U.G.T. (Union General de Trabajadores—the General Union of Workers—Socialist).

The P.S.U.C. (Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya—The Communist Party under another name).

ESQUERRA (Left Republican Party of Catalonia).

P.O.U.M. (Partito Obrero de Unification Marxista—Workers' Party of Marxist Unity).

These parties had the over-whelming support of the industrial workers in Catalonia and the Basque country (Bilbao and Santander), a majority of the peasants north of Madrid, a section of the professional class and the intellectuals and to my astonishment a small number of the village priests, especially in the Basque country, who boldly faced the hierarchy of the Church to take their stand with the poor to whom they had ministered and loved.

On the Fascist side there was almost the whole of the officer class in the Army, the official Catholic Church, the Spanish grandees, high finance and the majority of the peasantry south of Madrid where the Roman Church was strongest. The Fascists had all the arms (except a few which the conscripts loyal to the Republic had taken), the thirty thousand Moorish mercenaries and, in addition, the supplies of arms which they were receiving weekly from Germany and Italy. The lack of arms and munitions was the tremendous handicap under which the Republicans laboured. The uniform they wore was simply a rough khaki shirt with any coloured trousers, and they were fortunate indeed if they had one rifle for three men. They had no artillery, few machine guns, no tanks nor even armoured cars. But their spirit was indomitable. At the end of August, 1936, the Republicans held Madrid, Valencia, Barcelona and Bilbao. Madrid was being attacked without success by the Fascists from the south and west and later from Toledo. Barcelona and Valencia were quite free from Fascists and the workers had taken over the factories which had been evacuated by the employers, who had gone over to Franco and arms as well as armoured vehicles were being produced by the workers themselves.

I saw the system of workers' control in full force. I was shown over one factory in Barcelona. A small committee of workers, elected by their colleagues, and including the black-coated workers, met for half an hour every morning. They discussed matters and organised the work most efficiently. They had up-to-date charts to indicate the progress of the work. The factory discipline was self-imposed, and the foremen and overseers, also elected, had simply to co-ordinate the different operations. They showed me everything I wanted to see. When I expressed my delight at the smooth running of the factory and the evident comradeship among the workers, one of the Committee said to me: "You see, my friend, it's quite different now. We are working for ourselves."

## SENDING MEDICAL AID

I was very anxious to find out what further assistance we could give and discussed the matter with the Executive of P.O.U.M. They explained to me that the export of medical supplies was allowed from France and Britain and Andres Nin took me personally to the military hospital at Barcelona, so that I could see the position myself and make a proper report. In this hospital there were a couple of French doctors who had volunteered to assist. They were splendid men, working hour after hour in continuous heat attending several hundreds of wounded from the Aragon front. The supply of anaesthetics was so limited that it was used only in desperate cases. The mere removal of a finger or even a limb was carried out, as it was in the old days in the British Navy, by giving the patient sufficient rum to almost insensibilise him and holding him in place while the operation was carried out. I visited the hospital several times and I noticed that a mere flesh wound was treated very summarily. The wound was simply washed in warm water which had been boiled and the lips were immediately stitched together. I was so astonished that I said to the doctor: "Won't this poor chap get infection in the wound which has not been properly sterilised?" He replied: "The point is we haven't got the disinfectants, we haven't got the time and we have not one case of infection in a hundred." I left that hospital with my mind absolutely made up. I knew now how we could help and I also knew that we were in a position to do so. The doctors gave me lists of exactly what they wanted. I have the impression that they thought I was exaggerating when I said I would send the first consignment a fortnight after I got back to England.

I got back to London on September 7 (1936) after a much less exciting journey—or was I becoming accustomed to the excitement? We had plenty en route and were stopped half-a-dozen times before getting to the frontier, and the French customs officers were very suspicious. A special meeting of the I.L.P. Council was immediately held in London and I made my report. It was very well received and when I said the great need was for ready money and medical supplies, some members, who were pacifists, were tremendously relieved. Certain of our comrades had been talking about sending arms. This was completely impracticable. The amount of arms we could have got hold of would have been negligible; they would have been confiscated, and we should have finished up, quite uselessly, in prison. But medical supplies were quite different. We would count on substantial financial help from our good friends the Quakers and other humanitarians, who were not actually members of the Party. We launched our Spanish Aid Autumn Campaign. We had even larger meetings than previously. Because I had been in Spain, and was considered to be an independent observer, my services were called upon night after night.

Within ten days we had a very substantial sum of money available. I got in touch with the Socialist Medical Association and was able to purchase immediately at cost price a big consignment of the medical supplies wanted. We

could not get them direct to Barcelona and therefore sent them by air to Paris. They were picked up by friends in Air France and arrived at Barcelona next day free of charge. They were delivered just at the end of the fortnight and we gave widespread publicity to the telegram acknowledging their safe arrival. As nothing succeeds like success, the money kept pouring in and we began to have more ambitious ideas.

I think Fenner Brockway had the idea first. We decided to purchase a complete ambulance unit, stock it with all the supplies it would hold, and drive it through France to Spain.

We needed a man for the job and a friend named Martin came forward and volunteered. He had a very adventurous journey and when he got into Catalonia the P.S.U.C.<sup>1</sup> tried to get the ambulance from him, but he called for the assistance of our friends of P.O.U.M. at Gerona and three or four stalwarts accompanied him to Barcelona where the ambulance was safely handed over.<sup>2</sup>

By this time public feeling all over democratic Europe had reached fever pitch. News of the machine-gunning of eight thousand helpless civilian men and women in the bull-ring at Badajoz had come through. The Fascists claimed that this was a reply to the wholesale desecration of churches, murder of priests and raping of nuns of which the Republicans were supposed to have been guilty. Upon investigation it was found later that these allegations had no real foundation in fact. The only churches which were damaged were those used as military depots.

In Europe the Fascist powers, Germany and Italy, were then even more openly helping Franco; international finance was giving monetary support, while the democracies rigorously maintained their policy of non-intervention. The French workers were particularly restless. Many of them crossed the frontier to assist their Spanish comrades and had it not been for the fact that Leon Blum was the greatly respected Prime Minister, thousands of them would have surged across the Pyrenees taking arms with them. One trained division of French troops would have turned the scale at this stage, no matter on which side they fought, and it would have been with the Republicans.

There were no real pitched battles during this period, although the rebels had taken Irun and San Sebastian. There was marching and counter-marching. Villages and small towns changed hands every week. Madrid was besieged by the Fascists and Saragossa and Huesca by the Republicans. No real advance was made on either side; the superiority of the Fascists in arms and munitions was being met, to a certain extent, by the Republican factories in Barcelona and Valencia, but these sources of supply were running short through the lack of

<sup>1</sup>The Communist Party in Catalonia.

<sup>2</sup>This ambulance was named after Joaquim Maurin, the P.O.U.M. leader whose death had been announced in the fighting. This was actually a ruse to save his life, for he had been caught behind the Fascist lines when the revolt broke out and had been taken prisoner. He saved his own life by assuming a false name and identity and the cover story was maintained by the naming of this I.L.P. ambulance.

raw materials, unobtainable from abroad. Neither side had sufficient material superiority for a decisive offensive.<sup>3</sup>

During October we were besieged in London by many of our young members who begged the I.L.P. to form a contingent and send it to Spain. Personally I was not in favour of this. We could get the men across as ordinary travellers through France but we could not get arms and there were no arms available in Spain.

We yielded to the entreaties of two of our best young men, Bob Smillie, national chairman of the I.L.P. Guild of Youth, the grandson of old Robert Smillie, the Scottish miners' leader, and Ted Fletcher, of Birmingham.<sup>4</sup> They did not go as soldiers but as our representatives to work with and assist the youth sections of P.O.U.M. in Barcelona.

During October we received requests from our Spanish friends that I should be sent back for a long period and, if possible, one of our M.P.s should accompany me for a short visit. We had a meeting with our Members of Parliament, and McGovern said: "I want to go Spain with John. See if you can stop me!" John was then a man of about fifty, strong as a horse, and he had marched at the head of the hunger marchers from Glasgow to London. In addition, he was a Roman Catholic which was an advantage. He was the most courageous man I ever met. I don't know whether he lacked imagination but I do know that he did not understand what fear was.<sup>5</sup>

We left London on Guy Fawkes Day, amid the fireworks and the bonfires. John said to me: "I suppose we'll soon be seeing the real stuff."

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<sup>3</sup>The Communist Party was under orders from Moscow to support Blum at all costs, for Russia had signed the Franco-Soviet Pact and her foreign policy was based upon support for France. For this reason the French C.P. opposed any kind of direct action which would weaken the Blum Government. Here was an example of Russian foreign policy interests crippling the international demands of the Republican Government. Subsequent evidence shows that Hitler would not have escalated his support at that time and immediate and urgent aid from France could have smashed the Franco rebellion in its early stages.

In 1936 German rearmament had hardly got under way and all evidence shows that the equipment which the Nazis sent to Spain was much inferior to that sent by the Russians. All the German tanks, for example, were armed only with machine-guns whereas the Russian ones had 35mm. guns fitted. The Germans were able to send their supplies much more easily of course but "Hitler's Table-Talk", the "Ciano Diaries" and the "Nuremberg Trial Tribunal Proceedings" have all revealed that Hitler wanted a Spanish war only as a diversion for the West which would tie her up in all kinds of procedural wranglings whilst he got on with the business of rearmament. He wanted a long war. Immediate help from France would have scared him off.

<sup>4</sup>Later to become a Labour M.P.

<sup>5</sup>John McGovern (1887-1968) succeeded to John Wheatley's seat in Shettleston, Glasgow, and was I.L.P. M.P. for the constituency from 1930 to 1947, when he joined the Labour Party, continuing as Labour M.P. until 1959. In his later years he became an active member of Moral Rearmament—a surprising change, but his move to the right, politically, dated from his experiences with the Communist Party in Spain and in the 'forties. John McNair is right in paying tribute to his unique courage. He was one of the most fluent and powerful orators ever produced by the British working class movement, and it would be wrong to judge his contribution by his later years in life.

On my return to Barcelona, we received a rapturous welcome from our friends and because John was an M.P. (the first who had been there since the outbreak of the revolt) we were the guests of the Government and given a great double room in the Hotel Continental at the top of the Ramblas, near the Place Catalonia. A great public demonstration had been arranged at which McGovern was the principal speaker. He gave a magnificent, fighting speech, which was very well received although probably few of the audience understood it. The other two speakers were Julien Gorkin and Andres Nin, the former spoke in Castilian (Spanish) and the latter in Catalan. We were able to cater for all linguistic tastes.

The next morning John was out when I got up at about seven o'clock.

"Early bird, John," said I, when he came in.

"Yes, I've been making enquiries about going to Madrid . . . that's where the real fighting is going on, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes", I informed him, "Madrid is being attacked from the south and west."

The C.N.T. controlled the transport, and I went round to see a good friend, Souchez, a Norwegian syndicalist, and stated my case. "Oh yes, we can manage that at once. Just go and fetch McGovern and I'll have the car and drivers by eleven o'clock."

The car and drivers were ready at half past two. We had time to lunch in Barcelona and were on the road to Tarragona before three. The run down to Valencia was wonderful. It was still warm and miles of road were sheltered by the orange groves. Valencia is half way down Spain and about two hundred miles from Barcelona. We got there at nine o'clock and John wanted to push on across difficult mountainous country to Madrid. The drivers, naturally, would not travel through the night as guerilla war was going on in the mountains round Madrid. We, therefore, slept at Valencia.

We arrived at Madrid in the early evening on the following day. We had to stop at all the villages held by the Republicans, to ascertain whether the next village was still free. We did not run into any Fascists.

At Madrid we were taken immediately to the Headquarters of the C.N.T. in a great Spanish mansion. A committee meeting was going on and we were invited to comment on the international situation. In the middle, a terrific crash resounding through the whole building. "What on earth's that?" I asked.

"Oh, that's all right," the Chairman answered. "Just a Fascist shell from beyond the University City. They've been firing at Madrid for days, but their shells are not very dangerous."

In the middle of the night an air raid took place and we joined in to get the women and children down to the basement. The women and kiddies flocked around McGovern in complete confidence and he got them all down safely.

The next day we were taken all over the city. There had been heavy fighting in and around Madrid and the Fascists had been recently repulsed by the C.N.T. under Durruti. The Republican cause rallied on the arrival of the first contingents of the International Brigade just when we were there. The brigade was composed of foreign anti-Fascists and its arrival was greeted with great enthusiasm. My feeling is that it would have been more effective if it had not been controlled



completely by the Communists. This caused dissension in the ranks of the Republicans and later led to bitter hostility.

We did not prolong our stay in Madrid more than three days. We were mouths to be fed and could do nothing really useful. John's time was now up and he had to leave Spain. I accompanied him and Ted Fletcher to the frontier at Port Bou and went back to Barcelona, glad to have working with me my young friend and comrade, Bob Smillie.

When I got back to the office where I worked, a young Oxford woman graduate, Sybil Wingate, was waiting to see me. She belonged to the well-known Wingate family of military and exploring renown and I wondered what she wanted<sup>6</sup>. I could not imagine her being a Socialist. She explained that she had just obtained her M.A. at Oxford and had been sent to Spain to do research. She had finished her allotted time but wanted to stay on to assist the Republicans. . . . "I should like you to take me on as your secretary," she said. "I shall, of course, work voluntarily for you."

This was just what I wanted. Bob Smillie, with all his qualities, was not an office man, and I seemed to be spending too much time typing letters, translations and reports. We three worked admirably together.

There were three sections helping P.O.U.M. the British, French and American. The comrade in charge of the French section was Max Petel (who was later to marry Phyllis Hawley of Birmingham I.L.P.) and of the American, Professor Orr. Later there was a German section led by Willi Brandt, later to become Chancellor of West Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Towards the end of 1936 there was a lull in the fighting. Both sides were straining every nerve to replenish their supplies, but there were three ominous signs which I felt in the long run would tell against the Republicans. The first was the falling off in production of arms owing to the impossibility of obtaining new raw materials from abroad. The second, the growth of Franco's Fifth Column, not only in Madrid, but even in Barcelona. The third and most dangerous was the growing hostility between the Communists on the one hand and the C.N.T. and P.O.U.M. on the other. The Communists had already infiltrated deeply into the U.G.T. and were gaining strength and prestige owing to their monopoly of any arms received from Russia. They were also getting control of the Spanish police forces.

I was so alarmed at the situation that I tried from time to time to get in touch with the Communists at their Headquarters, but without success. Once I nearly succeeded, as I met a friendly American Communist and I think I made him

<sup>6</sup>She was the sister of Brigadier Orde Wingate of Chindit fame in the Second World War.

<sup>7</sup>Willi Brandt was in Spain for five months in 1937, representing the Sozialistischen Arbeiter Partei Deutschlands (S.A.P.). When he finally escaped he published a pamphlet which was actually a report to his Party about the situation of P.O.U.M. and the Spanish War and revolution. The Pamphlet was printed in Paris and distributed illegally in Germany; a project in which the I.L.P. participated to assist its brother-party, the S.A.P. His criticisms of the role of Russia and the Comintern in Spain led to his being immediately branded by the Communist Party as a "Social fascist", "Franco agent" and "Gestapo spy".

realise that ultimate victory depended upon absolute unity between the working class parties. He discussed the matter at Headquarters with the British and French sections and told me that I would be received by representatives of these sections if I went there at a certain time. I went and waited all morning but was not received. I doubt very much if my visit would have done any good, as the Communists were all Stalinists and had their orders from Moscow.<sup>8</sup>

## 4 THE ARRIVAL OF GEORGE ORWELL

During December 1936 we had an influx of British and American progressives and in early January I had the pleasure of meeting again my old friend, H. N. Brailsford. I made new friends in Cyril Connolly and George Orwell, and I met Ernest Hemingway and Don Passos.

We had long discussions together in which my sole object was to try to instil into them the necessary enthusiasm for our cause so that they would in their turn influence progressive and democratic opinion in Europe and America. Brailsford stayed about three weeks and we met every evening. I gave him some first hand information and he shared my misgivings, but he hoped that German and Italian aid to Franco would lessen because of British and French diplomatic activity. I thought this illusory as both Hitler and Mussolini were then complete masters in their countries and would make any promises which Western diplomacy asked for without changing their attitude in the slightest towards Franco.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>The Communist Party was under Russian instructions to make certain that there was no social revolution in Spain which would frighten off the western democracies. Russian foreign policy was firmly anchored to the Franco-Soviet Pact. In the Spanish War the Russians sent their own Comintern advisers to take control of the situation—and of the Spanish Communist Party. They were very small at the outbreak of war (smaller than P.O.U.M., for example) but they were able to use the prestige and the power which Russian arms gave them to obtain vital places in the Government. They built up their membership from the small shopkeepers and the middle classes. Using their undercover agents in the Government (such as Julio Alvarez del Vayo) they were able to influence policy and gain control of the police force and important units of the army, simply because they controlled the Political Commissars who had been created for the army. Del Vayo was in charge of this organisation. John was very trusting if he thought that a talk with the C.P. in Barcelona would sort things out. By this time the Comintern agents were in charge of events and the Spanish C.P. did not have a mind of its own.

<sup>9</sup>It should be remembered that H. N. Brailsford adopted the general Communist Party line on Spain and opposed the social revolution in Catalonia. He swallowed a lot of the Stalinist lies at the time but lived long enough to generously retract some of them. John McNair does not seem to have had quite the impact upon Brailsford that he hoped. They had much in common, of course, for Brailsford had been editor of the I.L.P. paper before the I.L.P. left the Labour Party.

In his general writings afterwards, Brailsford certainly drew a sharp distinction between the political atmosphere of Barcelona which was revolutionary and Madrid which was staid and bourgeois. In the *New Statesman and Nation* of May 25, 1937, he dealt with the transformation of the Communist Party into a non-revolutionary party and said this was not only a convenience but in his opinion was permanent because of the social composition of the C.P. . . . "it is no longer primarily a party of the industrial workers or even a Marxist Party." In short, Brailsford was saying the C.P. had attracted the type of members who would resist rather than support the social revolution

It was Eric Blair (George Orwell)<sup>10</sup> who became my greatest friend. He strolled into my office one day in December. He always took things easily and quietly and never seemed to be in a hurry.

"I'm looking for a chap named John McNair."

I replied, "I'm your lad". He grinned and produced letters from Fenner Brockway and H. N. Brailsford. I glanced at them and asked what I could do for him.

"I've come to Spain for two reasons. First to assist actively the Republicans and the second to gather material for a book I propose writing on the Fascist revolt."

"When you say 'actively', do you mean as a soldier?"

"Yes, I had some experience in Burma."

I smiled and said, "I've read 'Burmese Days'. I enjoyed it very much."

I explained the position to him. The two important sections of the Republican forces were those under the control respectively of the C.N.T. and the Communists. I told him that P.O.U.M. was a small section working with the C.N.T. He had better join either of the first two named. He said he was an anti-Stalinist, which barred the Communists, and was not very keen on joining the Anarcho-Syndicalists of the C.N.T. Could he not join P.O.U.M.?

I said I should start making enquiries, and take him down to the Lenin Barracks, the military H.Q. of P.O.U.M., next day.

"What about now?" he asked. I found that this was just like George Orwell. He was never rushing about in a hurry but seemed able always to get things done immediately.

"Bit of a hustler, aren't you? Let's go," said I, smiling.

He was an immediate success at the barracks. He spoke fair Castilian and sufficient French to understand a good deal of Catalan. He was a very tall chap, six feet four, and took size twelve in boots (The Spanish Army did not have a pair big enough for him). Most of the young Spaniards were small men and they at once looked up to and respected George. We had a chat with the friend in charge of the barracks and it was all arranged in ten minutes.

Some days later, when I went back to the barracks, the chief said, "Your tall English friend is marvellous. We've made him a sergeant. We could do with a lot more like him."

There he was in the barrack square, training about fifty young recruits. He had them running and marching. Teaching them rifle and bayonet drill without weapons, simply using sticks. They had never experienced anything like this as George ran and marched with the best of them. When they said they were tired (discipline was very slack until he tightened it up), he allowed them five minutes rest and no smoking. This staggered them but George was adamant.

<sup>10</sup>It is certain that at this time Orwell was usually referred to by his real name, "Eric". He went to Spain, however, with letters of introduction as a writer under the Orwell pen-name and John would meet him as such. Knowing John McNair and his habits I have every reason to believe that he would speak of "George" even though everyone else in the group spoke of "Eric". My friend, Staff Cottman, who was there at the time, endorses this view.

Then another solid hour of marching, running and jumping. . . .

He asked for nothing, simply slept rough in the barracks and had the same rations as the others. He amused me when he told me that the second evening he was there they tried to make him drunk on strong, red wine. "But you see, McNair, I'm accustomed to the stuff. When I was a 'plongeur' (kitchen washer of glasses etc., in Paris) I drank gallons, and they stopped just when I was getting interested."

One evening I managed to drag him away from the barracks and had a meal with him, Sybil Wingate and Bob Smillie. It was one of the most enjoyable evenings I had in Spain. He and Sybil went at it hammer and tongs on literature. Bob tried to talk politics. I wanted to keep the gathering a little less controversial and broke in: "Never mind about that; tell us, George, why you changed your original name, Eric Blair."

"Well, I hated the name Eric Blair. Eric seemed to smack of that phoney school story, 'Eric, or little by little' (Dean Farrar), and the Blairs have a very bloody history."

"But why George Orwell?" we enquired.

"I wanted a working-class name. George is good working-class, as you Geordies ought to know, and, of course, you've heard of the 'Orwell'—a good Suffolk proletarian river."

A few days after this he was sent to the Aragon Front and for the next month I only heard that he was doing a good job of work.

One night of this period stands out very vividly in my memory—New Year's Eve, 1936. Sybil had gone home to her digs and Bob Smillie and I were working hard together until about nine in the evening. We both felt tired and hungry and decided to call it a day. Bob startled me by saying in an exaggerated Scottish accent, "Well, can we no' hae a wee drappie?" Bob practically never touched intoxicants. I happened to have some of the stuff which I had bought from my hotel proprietor at ten pesetas (3/-) a bottle.

We had a good meal and then I went to fetch the bottle, and at midnight we took it out to the cool terrace and did what millions of good Scots were doing all over the world. We toasted the New Year and we toasted it well. Bob sang me the old, old Scottish songs. I had reached the stage of maudlin nostalgia which whisky brings and felt a warm surge of affection for Bob. It was the last New Year's Eve he ever saw and I'm glad I was with him and that we were both happy.

## 5

# THE I.L.P. CONTINGENT

On January 10, the ILP contingent arrived in Barcelona. There were about thirty-five men in the charge of Bob Edwards. They had managed to get out of Britain just before the ban was placed on all volunteers, and those who did not get away in this first contingent were not able to leave Britain. Although I had been advised of their coming I could not find out either the hour or the day of their arrival. I was having lunch with Brailsford when I heard a lot of

English voices at the hotel entrance. I dashed downstairs and a minute afterwards was shaking hands all round and making arrangements for a good meal. Very few of them had any military experience but they were all very keen and expected to be sent to the front at once.

This was, of course, not possible and I took them along to the Lenin Barracks to mix with their Spanish comrades. After ten days it was decided to send them to the Aragon front, where the Republicans were sitting round the town of Huesca, not making any progress through lack of proper equipment. The day of their departure was fixed for January 20, after ten days of training. On that morning, Bob Smillie came to me and said, "I'm sorry I'm leaving you, John." I had expected this but tried to dissuade him. Anything I might have said would have been in vain, so we just shook hands.

In the afternoon, Sybil Wingate came to tell me she was leaving, too. "There are some Spanish women acting as nurses and even stretcher bearers, and they're taking me." I could do nothing about it and could only go to the station and see them off.

The C.N.T. had their band out and they entrained joyfully to the strains of "Sons of the People". They were given fruit and flowers and wine by the populace and I shook hands all round, promised to go to the front to visit them, and walked back in the darkness to the city, alone.

The next few weeks were very dull and monotonous. I had been separated from all my friends. Even the journalists and writers had left Barcelona. But I had not forgotten my promise to go to the Aragon Front to visit the I.L.P. contingent. I started worrying the authorities about transport but was only able to get it when it was decided to bring all women from the front line. Sybil Wingate had been instructed to return to Barcelona but she had not taken any notice and she was supported by all the contingent which had grown to respect and admire the work she was doing.

We left Barcelona one marvellous spring day at the end of February, taking the high road to Saragossa. I kept my eyes on the kilometre stones and wondered how near we should get to this highly fortified city, held then and always by the Fascists. When we were only twenty kilometres from Saragossa, we turned north and came to our lines besieging Huesca which is about fifty miles south of the Spanish slopes of the Pyrenees. These great peaks were on our right and the winter snow had not yet melted. I was surprised to see that at certain points our lines were not more than a couple of miles from the town of Huesca. The trenches were very shallow and without any real protection. Neither side had any artillery, although there were one or two small guns used by the Fascists. If we had had a little artillery Huesca would have fallen within twenty-four hours. There was no possibility of taking the town by a frontal assault, as the troops had not sufficient rifles and could never have crossed the fields successfully to get near enough for an assault at close quarters. We did not have the weapons for fighting.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>There is plenty of evidence here to give the lie to the Stalinist stories about P.O.U.M. keeping back arms for its own sectarian use. The reverse was actually true. The Russian arms were given to Stalinist units in the Republican army and the C.N.T. and P.O.U.M. militias were deliberately starved of supplies. In this way did the Stalinists obtain their over-riding power.

It was in one of the villages that I found Sybil Wingate. She was not at all pleased to see me. She was dressed as a militia man and looked as smart and capable as she was. "Why do you come worrying me, John? I'm very happy here. I like the men and I think I'm doing useful work." I agreed with her completely but had to insist and we arranged to go back the next morning to Barcelona.

That night I began to realise the horrors of civil war. A bed was found for me in the house of a dear old Spanish village woman. She didn't want to take me in, fearing probably some sort of reprisal; but when she saw I was a middle-aged civilian and was told I was English she agreed. I gathered she had sons and nephews fighting on different sides and had no idea why they were fighting, but could only repeat that it was terrible, terrible, and she prayed every day and every night that the good God would not allow her loved ones to kill each other.

She took me to a big bedroom and left me. I noticed that a large picture over the bed had been turned with its face to the wall. I naturally turned it back and saw it was the Virgin and the Child. Next morning she brought me some warm milk, and when she saw I had righted the picture she shrieked with fright. I calmed her down and said we had hundreds of pictures of "La Madonna". She still kept on sobbing silently and then burst out that she now knew we would cut her throat. She said that her priest had told her. "Cut your throat!" I exclaimed. "I would as soon cut my own mother's. I'm simply very grateful to you for your kindness."

She would not take any money. I asked what I could do for her. "If I could only have a little sugar." I dashed off to our stores and got a big packet. I saw a Catalan friend there who spoke the local dialect. I told him the story and he came back with me to reassure the old lady properly, and, more than that, to promise her complete protection. She wept again and to my embarrassment kissed my hands.

## IN PRISON IN BARCELONA

As we moved on towards Easter 1937 I found the position becoming very difficult in Barcelona owing to the continuous infiltration by the Stalinists into various government departments and their increasing control over the civil and military police. Their local paper in Barcelona was full of bitter attacks on the C.N.T. and particularly P.O.U.M., whom they called "Trotskyists" and "Social Fascists". As the I.L.P. had been working with the Communists and the Socialist League in Britain in the Unity Campaign and as the French

Socialists and Communists had also formed a Popular Front, I could not understand the bitter hostility shown to us by the Spanish Stalinists. It was only later I found out that a number of Russian secret police men and several American Stalinists were working surreptitiously in their ranks.<sup>12</sup>

During March, a young Quaker named Webb managed to get through to us and volunteered for ambulance work. We were having coffee together that night in a big cafe in the Ramblas discussing matters when suddenly two Civil Guards came in and sat on either side of us. They were armed with revolvers which they ostentatiously displayed. They ordered us to get up and hustled us into a waiting car. We had no alternative but to obey. They took us at break-neck speed through the dark, back streets of Barcelona and then I began to get anxious. I reflected grimly how easy it would have been for them to have finished us off quietly and thrown our bodies anywhere. I remained silent, thinking hard.

We landed at the big prison of Barcelona and were pushed inside a room full of other people. I asked the warders looking after the room why we had been brought there. The reply was "Wait". I realised at once the folly of waiting. The longer we waited quietly the more accustomed they would become to us, and the less heed they would take of our protestations.

I started shouting at the top of my voice and we brandished our British passports. The warders motioned for silence and went out locking the door behind them. Webb and I kicked at the door and shouted as loudly as we could. I was in a blazing temper. This young Quaker had come to Spain to risk his life, if necessary, in ambulance work to save others, and here he was, thrown into prison without a word of explanation.

A full half hour passed and then the door was opened by three or four warders and a civilian came in. He started talking to me first, but I would not let him speak. I kept shouting at him asking him who the hell he thought he was, detaining two perfectly innocent British citizens. I said I was a personal friend of Andres Nin and Juan P. Fabregas of the Economic Council of Catalonia, and that I knew Senior Companys, the President of Catalonia. This appeared to shake him and he asked me in French to wait a few minutes.

He came back in five minutes and beckoned us to follow him. "Where are you taking us now?" I asked. "To the Governor," he said. "On your honour as a Spanish gentleman?" I queried. This seemed to touch him, and he replied, "On my honour."

We were taken before a middle-aged man who was probably the acting Governor. He said there had been a misunderstanding and it was too late to contact any member of the Council that night. We should therefore be taken to a restaurant for a meal and released as soon as our bona-fides were established. I could only agree.

We had, nevertheless, to stay there all night. About nine o'clock in the morning,

<sup>12</sup>There was, of course, a timelag operating, for the British C.P. was already moving into its "Popular Front" era. As yet the I.L.P. was being tolerated and not being attacked as "Fascist" or "agents of Hitler". That was to come later.

my friend Andres Nin came in. He had only just heard of our arrest and had come at once. After a few words we were released and taken by Andres to the Executive of P.O.U.M. I gave my report and it was gravely received. They told me that they had informed the Civil Authorities months before that I was a staunch supporter of the Republican cause, and I was fairly well known. It was their opinion that my arrest was due to increasing Stalinist pressure. They said I had done right in making a big row. Otherwise they might not have known where I was and any "accident" might have happened.

## THE DEATH OF BOB SMILLIE

I come now to the most tragic event which darkened my remaining stay in Spain: the death of my young friend, Bob Smillie.<sup>13</sup>

Bob was Chairman of the I.L.P. Guild of Youth, and had permission for 10 days' leave from Spain to attend meetings of the International Socialist Youth Sections in Paris and in London, to help in organising a Youth Campaign to assist the Republican cause. He was arrested by the Spanish police at the frontier and he was searched. A "souvenir" in the form of a small piece of shrapnel was found and his P.O.U.M. badge. He was immediately conducted in charge of guards, not to Barcelona but to Valencia, and thrown into prison for this "crime."

I heard of this two or three days afterwards and moved heaven and earth to get to Valencia to do what I could. It was impossible for me to obtain transport either by road or rail. This was no longer controlled by the C.N.T., and a special pass was required which I could not obtain. I no longer had any qualms in making public our difficulties and, in desperation, I went to the British Consul in Barcelona who promised to do what he could and set the official channels going.

The next day a Scottish friend of ours, David Murray, arrived from London with the money we needed and I told him all about Bob. David spoke good Spanish and immediately volunteered to go to Valencia. He had no difficulty in getting there, as he was travelling as a British businessman and an expert on steel. I anxiously awaited his return, when he told me he had seen Bob, several times, and that he was in good health. David had been assured by the Prison

<sup>13</sup>Bob Smillie was the grandson of Bob Smillie, the veteran miners' leader and an I.L.P. pioneer. His parents were Socialists working a little farm in Lanarkshire and giving of their time and money to the Socialist movement. At the age of 20 young Bob left his university course in Glasgow in order to go to Spain and help in the cause. A brilliant future had been forecast for him. He was a fine debater and platform speaker and his death was a sad blow to his parents and to the I.L.P. Guild of Youth of which he was the National Chairman. After his arrest at the frontier he was taken to Valencia which was under tight Communist Party control and not back to Barcelona, where the Stalinist hold was more tenuous. Without doubt, he died because at the frontier the guards found his P.O.U.M. badge.

Authorities that he would be released in a few days and there was no cause for anxiety. David also saw the British Consul in Valencia who confirmed what the prison authorities had said and who took charge of the case.

This took a tremendous load off my mind, and as I had been summoned to London to decide on our future policy, I proceeded there immediately.

I had only been in Head Office for two days when I received a telegram telling me that Bob had died of appendicitis in the prison hospital on June 11. It was the greatest shock I ever had in my life. I received my instructions to get the I.L.P. contingent out of Spain and I dashed back there immediately. It was still impossible for me to get to Valencia and I was informed officially that Bob had died in the Provincial Hospital and had been buried in Valencia Cemetery.<sup>14</sup>

The first person I saw in Barcelona was David Murray and he gave me the following facts:

On Thursday, June 10, David had received a telegram from the Valencia lawyer informing him that Bob was ill. David had visited the prison on Friday, June 11, and asked to see Bob. He was told that the prisoner was indisposed in the Prison Hospital and did not want to see anyone. Being unaware of Bob's serious state, David Murray made no special effort to see him as he considered it more important to press on the authorities concerned. He did, however, take the opportunity of seeing one of the Scottish prisoners, who confirmed Bob's illness but was not aware of its seriousness.

The day after, David again visited the prison and was told by an official that Bob apparently had appendicitis. David was greatly disturbed and sent telegrams

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<sup>14</sup>A tribute to the courage and leadership of Bob Smillie had been paid by his commander on the sector of the Aragon Front where he was fighting. In a letter despatch, dated April 16, 1937, George Kopp, his Belgian commander, wrote:

"We have had some very 'hot' days and have made an advance of some thousand yards; the enemy counter-attacked, but did not succeed in regaining an inch of the lost ground. In the night of the 13th we made a somewhat audacious raid on the enemy's positions of the Ermita Salas, in order to relieve pressure on the Ascaso Front . . . We have had a complete success, which is largely due to the courage and discipline of the English comrades who were in charge of assaulting the principal of the enemy's parapets. Among them I feel it my duty to give a particular mention of the splendid action of Eric Blair, Bob Smillie and Paddy Donovan who behaved exceptionally well."

Paddy Donovan died in London in 1971, still a member of the I.L.P. Eric Blair was, of course, Orwell. George Kopp himself was a heroic character who had come from Belgium where he had a good job as an engineer. He had been illegally manufacturing arms for the Spanish Government and when apprehended he departed for Spain itself, where he fought valiantly, with P.O.U.M.

He was Commander of the third regiment, Lenin Division (i.e., the P.O.U.M. Militia). After being arrested he was held in a G.P.U. jail in Spain for almost 18 months, losing seven stones in weight. He managed to get out and into France at the time of the Republican collapse and then made his way to England where he arrived in January, 1939. He was nursed back to health by Orwell's brother-in-law and his wife, Laurence and Gwen O'Shaughnessy. In September, 1939, he joined the French army to "have another go at the fascists." He was captured by the Germans in June, 1940, but escaped . . . He worked as a civil engineer in France but operated on behalf of British Naval Intelligence, until being picked up by the Gestapo. In September, 1943, he escaped, made his way into the Underground and was flown out by the British. He subsequently married a sister of Gwen O'Shaughnessy, Doreen Hunton, but this brave man died in 1951 from the legacy of his war wounds.

to London calling for immediate intervention by the Government. These telegrams were never received and must, therefore, have been stopped by the authorities. During the whole of Sunday he continued his visits. . . the replies from the authorities were that "all attention was being given" and that "the case was receiving attention."

On Monday morning, June 14, David Murray again went to the prison, this time with the lawyer, and demanded to see Bob. No difficulty was raised about their entering the prison on this occasion. The lawyer was informed that Bob had been seriously ill, and a few minutes later was told that he was dead.

It will be seen from all this that at the time when the authorities were telling David that the case was receiving attention, Bob had been dead for 24 hours. He was ill from the 4th to the 11th of June, and the prison authorities made no effort to advise the British Consulate, the lawyer or David Murray. No communications were received by Bob's parents from him during the whole of his imprisonment, which appears to prove either that he was not allowed to write or that his letters were suppressed.

Later, I made extensive enquiries both in Spain and Britain but could never learn anything definite. It is still an inexplicable tragedy that a young man, in perfect health, should suddenly die of appendicitis which could be as easily treated then as now. Several terrible facts remain. His death would certainly not have occurred if he had not been arrested and taken to Valencia prison and it probably would not have occurred, even if he had appendicitis, had he received proper and immediate attention. Further, the attitude of the prison authorities was utterly reprehensible. They, at least, must have known of his death and yet for three days they hid the fact. The body of Bob Smillie was never seen by any of his friends.

A considerable body of opinion both in Britain and in France referred to this tragedy as another political assassination. I refrained from doing this, having found no proof nor even direct evidence. In a report which I made at the time I referred to Bob's death as "criminal neglect" and am prepared to maintain this judgment.<sup>15</sup>

George Orwell came to Barcelona for medical attention to a septic hand.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>It will be appreciated by the reader that this portion of McNair's account, dealing with the death of Bob Smillie is chronologically out of sequence with much of the narrative which follows it.

<sup>16</sup>Orwell, in "Homage to Catalonia," does not mention his hand but he details the way in which his battalion was relieved in the line on April 25, and by the 26th he was back in Barcelona, after three and a half months at the front. He paints a vivid picture of the way the city had changed from one with a revolutionary atmosphere in December to a bourgeois one at the end of April. Military uniforms and blue overalls had given way to regular army uniforms and "fat prosperous men, elegant women and sleek cars were everywhere."

"A deep change had come over the town. There were two facts that were the keynotes of all else. One was that the people—the civil population—had lost much of their interest in the war: the other was that the normal division of society into rich and poor, upper and lower class was reasserting itself."

In his spare time at the front, Orwell had been writing the first chapters of his book, "Homage to Catalonia." He was extremely anxious that his wife, Eileen, should get into Spain, at least to Barcelona, so that they could see each other occasionally. I gathered that she was even more anxious and was actually waiting at Perpignan. George said, "Now that you've lost Sybil, will you make arrangements for Eileen to get over the frontier and take her on as your secretary?" But the position was very different from what it had been when I took on Sybil Wingate, and at first I declined.

"This is no place for her. The position is deteriorating. I've already been in prison myself for no reason and I'm not able to give protection to your wife," I explained.

However, after some argument, I was off to Perpignan and brought back a happy smiling Eileen. They had a few days in Barcelona together before George went back to the front and she stayed in my office until the end, lodging with a kind Spanish woman married to an Englishman who had joined our contingent and who was with Orwell and the others at the Front.

During April I went up to Huesca several times, as Bob Edwards had been asked to attend the I.L.P. conference in Glasgow to make a report. The position was still stationary but I noticed the boys were getting restless at the inactivity and I did what I could to calm them down.<sup>17</sup>

## 8

# STREET FIGHTING IN BARCELONA

In Barcelona a very ugly situation was developing. Food was getting short. All raw materials had been used up and the ill-feeling between the Stalinists and the C.N.T. and P.O.U.M. had turned into acute bitterness.

On Monday, May 3, this blazed out into actual street fighting. The Stalinists started by attacking the Telephone Building which had been controlled by the C.N.T. A number of casualties resulted and the fighting spread all over the city. The Stalinists had gained control of most of the civil and military guards, all work and traffic was brought to a standstill, the city was in complete darkness for four nights and the utmost confusion reigned. About half the I.L.P. contingent was in the city on leave and they were at the bottom of the Ramblas with the P.O.U.M. people helping the C.N.T. I was alone in my office about

<sup>17</sup>Bob Edwards (born 1905) has been Labour and Co-op M.P. for Bilston since 1955 and is an ex-national chairman of the I.L.P. He was a Captain in the P.O.U.M. Militia and led the I.L.P. contingent in Spain. When he returned to Britain at the end of March it was to attend the I.L.P. Annual Conference in Glasgow, Easter, 1937, but he was unable to return to Spain because of the ban imposed by the British Government. It was at Huesca that George Orwell was wounded, being shot through the neck by a sniper.

a mile away. I managed to get Eileen away the first morning and begged her to stay safely in her lodgings. About eight o'clock the next morning some of the P.O.U.M. young men, who were stationed in the building, came into my office bringing coffee and food. They brought half a dozen hand grenades and told me to put them in the drawer to use if the building was attacked.

"For God's sake, take them away," I said, "I don't know how to use them, anyway. Can't you see that all this street fighting is opening the way for the Fascists?"

The second day wore on and the fighting became more intense and widespread. There was absolutely nothing I could do. The streets were completely deserted except for a few armoured cars dashing about. Firing was taking place all down the Ramblas. The left hand side appeared to be in the hands of the Stalinists and the right hand side in the hands of the C.N.T. with P.O.U.M. At about nine o'clock at night I felt I must get in touch with our people at the Place Christopher Columbus and I managed to get hold of George Orwell. We exchanged a few words and I asked him what they were doing. "We're simply staying here in case we're attacked, but I wish we had a few cigarettes." I said, "Keep the boys under cover. You didn't come to Spain to be shot in the dark in mad street fighting. I'll bring you some cigarettes." He shouted, "Don't be so bloody silly"—but I cut off.

I stuffed my pockets with as many "Lucky Strike" cigarettes as I could and went out into the dark streets. As I had promised the cigarettes I was afraid not to take them. When I got into the streets I heard the patter of stray bullets all round above me, striking the masonry of the houses. I was then afraid to turn back. "You're a bloody fool, John, you and your blasted cigarettes." I wanted to cross the Ramblas to get on the right hand side where my friends were. I had enough sense not to run across, thereby drawing attention to myself, so I just sauntered. To keep my spirits up and let them know I was a friend, I whistled loudly, "Sons of the People." I saw a barricade at the end of the street held by the C.N.T., and somebody shouted, "Halte!" I duly stopped. A couple of militia men darted out dragging me behind the barricades to comparative safety.

"Who are you and what are you doing?"

I gave my name, showed my worker's passport and said that I had been summoned to the Headquarters of P.O.U.M. to discuss the situation with them and their friends of the C.N.T. This was not quite true, but I thought it prudent not to draw public attention to my cigarettes as I feared they might be requisitioned, and it did seem rather silly carrying cigarettes about amid bullets in dark streets. I was taken to the back entrance of the P.O.U.M. Headquarters. The first person I met was Bob Smillie. "Where have you come from, John? We were all anxious about you alone up there."

"Oh, I've just come down with the cigarettes George wanted." In a minute they were all round me and my fifteen packets of twenty were distributed amid rejoicing and exclamations of "Good old John." I felt the risk had been worth while.

I am glad to say that George Orwell took the same view as I did about the street fighting. I got in touch with the Executive of P.O.U.M. and to my astonish-

ment some of them did not appear to realise the seriousness of the position. They said they were at last able to stand up to the Stalinists. I was too tired to mince my words and said to them: "You're losing what influence you had in the city and you're letting the real enemy, the Fascists, know of our hopeless disunity."

The fighting eased up the next day and stopped completely on May 6, when it was learned that a division of Republican troops had been sent from Valencia to "restore order." When I got the English and French papers a couple of days later I was amazed to read that the street fighting was designated as a P.O.U.M. revolt against the Government. This was a typical Stalinist lie, and it appeared in such a reputable paper as the "News Chronicle." The fighting was as I have described and any attempt to suggest that a small organisation like P.O.U.M. either could or would rise against the Republican Government was absurd. It was the typical Stalinist propaganda of smearing first those whom it wished to destroy. I remembered only too clearly the fate of all those who had refused to accept the Stalinist line. No matter how this "line" changed or was modified by the Moscow bureaucracy it was sacrosanct and had to be followed, or . . .

It was with a heavy heart that I went about my other tasks. My instructions were clear: to get those members of the I.L.P. contingent who still remained in Spain back to Britain as soon as possible. Some were still at the front, but P.O.U.M. was being liquidated and they were on their way back to Barcelona. I saw the British Consul as I knew that they would all have to call there to get their exit visas, and left sufficient money for each one of them. They were in no particular danger as they had their civilian clothing and British passports and would be looked upon as returning British tourists.

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## ON THE RUN FROM THE COMMUNISTS

For four of us the position was very different: George Orwell, Eileen, Stafford Cottman and myself. I had been informed that we were all on the lists of suspects and warrants were out for our arrests. We had a council of war and decided to stay together and leave Spain at the same time. George and Eileen would not separate, and Orwell summed it up when he said; "Let's all stick together and fight it through—damn them all."

In the meantime I had seen the other foreign friends. I saw Max Petel but as he was a member of the French Socialist Party and there were a lot of French people in Barcelona his position was not dangerous. Then I met my old friend, Willy Brandt. Willy was making his own arrangements to leave by steamer. I fixed up a final appointment for the three of us next morning.

Having completed these arrangements I went back as usual to my old room in the hotel but the hall porter, who was a friend, stopped me and said, "Don't

go in there, the guards are waiting for you." I immediately backed out and started walking down the darkening Ramblas. I decided to sleep at a place I knew off the Place Macia, where Cottman actually lodged. I went there and was at once given a room on the sixth floor right on the front. It was then about eleven o'clock on a hot summer night and I lay on my bed in my thin pyjamas gasping and dozing. I suddenly woke up and remembered that I had two important, and what could be considered incriminating, documents in my bag. One was the list of arms and munitions which the I.L.P. contingent had possessed and the other a tracing of that section of the trenches which they manned. These documents had been given to me for safe keeping by Georges Kopp, the Belgian friend who had taken over command of the contingent when Bob Edwards left for the I.L.P. conference. I also had the manuscript of part of George Orwell's book, later to be entitled 'Homage to Catalonia'.

I knew I must destroy the documents. I would burn them. I tried with the tracing paper but it would not burn, it only smoked and melted a bit. I was now wide awake and knew I must finish the job. I took the documents to the W.C., tore them into little pieces and pulled the chain to flush them down, but there was no water. I went into the kitchen and got a bucket of water to flush them down. Then I went back to bed.

At 1.30 in the morning I heard heavy steps coming along the passage and a loud voice shouted in Spanish "Open, in the name of the law!"

"This is it," thought I, as I unlocked the door. Six burly guards rushed in, seized me in my thin pyjamas and threw me on the bed. They searched the room at once for a revolver. I thanked my stars that I had never accepted one. Then the sergeant in charge started the interrogation in Spanish. "Who are you? Where are your papers? What are you doing in Spain?"

I felt my only line was that of a tired, phlegmatic British traveller, so I yawned and said in English: "I am here helping the Republicans. My British passport is on the dressing table." The sergeant did not understand English and continued shouting, so I added in French: "I represent the I.L.P., working with the Communist Party in Britain, and we have brought medical supplies and money to assist the Spanish workers."

The sergeant understood this and asked me to prove it. "My papers are all in my bag and they will prove it to you," I said. The bag was opened and letters produced. They were perfectly harmless and simply referred to medical supplies, and mention was made of our collaboration with the Communists in Britain. I was careful to translate the most favourable passages. The men had now relaxed a bit so I said to one of them: "You'll find some English cigarettes in my coat pocket. Let's have a smoke." They were passed round but the sergeant frowned and kept rifling among my papers. He found a sealed envelope addressed to one of our lads which had been given to me by his fiancée in England to hand over to him. I had to read it to him, though there was nothing in a simple little love letter. Indeed, it was moving. At the end, the girl had put a few crosses. "Ah", said the sergeant, "a secret code. What does it mean?" I laughed and explained. Suddenly the sergeant came across George Orwell's manuscript. He glanced through it and saw such words as "Huesca", "P.O.U.M.", "Barcelona". "Ah,



now we've got something—what's all this about?"

I pretended to be getting impatient and said: "That's the draft of a book written by a great English writer to tell the world of the heroic struggle carried on against international Fascism by you and your fellow countrymen." I translated parts of it.

"What about P.O.U.M.?" he queried.

"That's one of the small parties, isn't it? The author naturally had to refer to all the parties," I reminded him. At last he was satisfied and they finally departed. I knew at once what would happen. Next morning their report would be seen and another squad would be sent out to arrest me officially. I went along to Cottman's room at the far end of the corridor and woke him up.

We dared not go out in the middle of the night, so we waited till about five o'clock and then quietly left. We went to a quiet little cafe, owned by a friend, and into his back room for coffee and a rest. Another problem was worrying me. I remembered the final appointment with Willy Brandt and Max Petel at my place for nine o'clock. At all costs they must be stopped as otherwise they would walk right into the hands of the waiting police. Staff Cottman volunteered to go to warn them, as he was not known to the police. After a long, agonizing wait Staff returned. "Everything's O.K., John," he declared, and we were all able to meet at the cafe a little later.

We were then, to use the expressive phrase, "on the run". I saw the Stalinist morning paper and read that a warrant had been issued for the arrest of one John McNair, who had stolen fifty million pesetas. A good whopping lie, one of the sort that sticks. I read also that James Maxton was a "social fascist" and my good friend Fenner Brockway "a lackey of capitalism".<sup>18</sup>

We had somehow or other to get through the next forty-eight hours as we intended leaving by steamer towards the end of the week and had to wait for the exit visas for our passports at the consulate. The greatest difficulty was how to pass the nights: the last was spent on a hillside sleeping under some bushes, assailed by mosquitoes and big red ants. The visas had now come through, but we learned that the steamer would not sail for a few days. We decided to leave that day by train, but discovered to our horror that the train had left that morning. Another night in Barcelona! But we were lucky enough to find a little hotel near the station and over a bottle or two of wine we became friendly with the patron. I told him we had made a mistake about the train and were very annoyed as it meant going back to our hotel a good distance away. He invited us to stay the night. "Don't worry... I'm not telephoning to any police." I glanced at Orwell and he nodded his head.

The night passed quietly and early next morning we returned to the station. We boarded the train for France and sat apart from each other. I remember I was reading Wordsworth, Cottman my copy of John Masefield and Orwell was getting on with his book. It was a very slow train and trundled up to Port Bou where we had all to get out and pass the final passport inspection. We went through in the arranged order. I saw the others pass through safely and then my

<sup>18</sup>The Appendices contains I.L.P. Head Office letters refuting the accusations and warning all I.L.P. and Communist Party Branches of the trumped-up charges against McNair, the I.L.P. and P.O.U.M.

turn came. The officials looked at me and scrutinised my passport. "British journalist?" I nodded and smiled. My passport was stamped and I was through. Evidently the police were still looking for us in Barcelona and had not advised the frontier.

We went back into the waiting train. I hoped it would start immediately but it didn't move. Half an hour passed and then the officials mounted the train again for a further inspection of passports. I felt sure that this time they had received further instructions and were looking for us. When they came to me, I handed them my passport, smiling, and said, "You've already stamped it."

"That's all right. We make a final check before the train starts as people sometimes get on to the train from the far side," was the reply. Then we started and in a minute were in the darkness of the long, international tunnel. In twenty minutes we were steaming into the sunlit station of Cerbere.

We were in France.



## APPENDIX

The Russian Agents who operated in Spain were almost all liquidated in the successive waves of purges which were to follow in Moscow. The leading N.K.V.D. agent in Spain, Orlov<sup>1</sup> defected and published details of the massacres of other working class parties during the Civil War. The Spanish Communist Party leader Jesus Hernandez<sup>2</sup> who was Minister of Information in the Republican Government has also provided chapter and verse. At the time the Stalinists dominated the left-wing press in Western Europe and the facts were therefore hidden or brutally attacked as "Trotskyist lies". The Moscow Purge Trials had their counterparts in the assassination of the truth by Communist Parties outside of Russia.

The leading theoretician of the British Communist Party, Monty Johnstone has also admitted that there were crimes committed in the period, whilst at the same time supporting the general perspective of the C.P. "The overall policy of the Spanish Communist Party in the Civil War was, I believe correct, though many mistakes were made and great harm was done by the way in which at the height of the Stalinist purges in the Soviet Union N.K.V.D. (Soviet State Security) agents were sent into Spain and carried out measures of repression against honest revolutionaries such as Andres Nin, the leader of the leftist P.O.U.M."<sup>3</sup>

In this period the I.L.P. was a lone voice in providing information which now is accepted as being historically accurate. Men like Orwell, Brockway, John McNair and Bob Edwards (later to become M.P. for Bilston) were the voices of truth and socialism. Some indication of the way in which the I.L.P. tried to defend McNair and break through the tissue of lies with the facts about what was happening may be gauged from the following letter sent out from I.L.P. Head Office to Party Branches. The third letter is a direct appeal to Communist Party branches which was intended to be sent out by local I.L.P. secretaries.

<sup>1</sup>"The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes" Orlov. New York 1953

<sup>2</sup>"La Grande Trahison" Jesus Hernandez. Fasquelle. Paris 1953

<sup>3</sup>"Cogito. Journal of the Young Communist League" May 1976 Monty Johnstone

## FOR THE INFORMATION OF I.L.P. BRANCHES INTERNATIONAL BUREAU FOR REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST UNITY

Secretariat: I.L.P. Head Office, 35 St. Bride Street, London, E.C.4., England  
24th June, 1937

Dear Comrade,

The latest news from Barcelona shows that the situation is grave. The P.O.U.M. has been made illegal. Warrants have been issued for the forty members of its Executive Committee and Council and members of the Party are being arrested for possessing membership cards. The Headquarters have been taken over by Government forces and the tricolour flag of the Spanish Government flies about it. The Maurin Institute, the resources of the Red Aid and "La Batalla" have been taken over.

Andres Nin has been arrested. Press reports say that he has been taken to Madrid. Other reports say that he has been taken to Carthagenia or Murcia (?). Gorkin was due to answer a charge in connection with the May Day issue of "La Batalla", but in view of the suppression of P.O.U.M. regarded it as his duty to go into hiding in order to make arrangements for carrying on the work of the Party. A number of the other leaders, including, it is believed, Andrade, are still at liberty. In some cases their wives have been arrested as hostages.

Comrades from abroad are in hiding. Proceedings have been ordered against John McNair, the Assistant Secretary of the International Bureau and I.L.P. representative at Barcelona. The Press reports state that he has been taking letters to P.O.U.M. and has carried 5,000 pesetas to the Red Aid. I enclose a statement which deals with the charges against McNair.

An attempt is being made prove the P.O.U.M. and its supporters guilty of espionage. Already one thousand persons have been arrested on this charge including some members of the C.N.T.-F.A.I. The C.N.T. is partly disarmed and does not appear to be in the mood for action. The only hope, therefore, is from abroad.

"You must, every day and by all means, in every way, protest, cry out, make your voice heard in the defence of P.O.U.M." write our friends from P.O.U.M. "You must send numerous protests to the Negrin Government. It is upon you that the heads of our imprisoned comrades will depend. We, the foreigners who are free in Barcelona, are staying here to prepare the ground for the International defence, but it depends upon you to save those who are menaced. Do your utmost—we need it."

We ask every Party to respond to this appeal at once. Protests should be sent not only by the Party but by all the working-class organisations whom you can influence.

A delegation including Deputies is immediately proceeding from France. I have arranged to accompany it. I left for Paris on June 24th. Please take action at once and report to us what you are doing.

Yours fraternally,

FENNER BROCKWAY  
Secretary.

INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY  
NATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL  
35 ST. BRIDE STREET, LONDON, E.C.4.

24th June, 1937

Dear Comrades,

Following swiftly on the news of Bob Smillie's death while a prisoner of the Valenica Government, comes the news of what is obviously a trumped-up charge against John McNair. This calls for immediate action.

After consulting with the Parliamentary Group on the matter, Fenner Brockway has today left for Spain. He will be joined in Paris by a delegation which will include several members of the French Chamber of Deputies (i.e. the House of Commons) and other international working class leaders. In view of the acute international crisis it was not possible for any of the Parliamentary Group to go.

Before he went, Fenner sent out to all the Parties in the International Bureau a statement on the arrest of McNair and, as it is essential that the Party should have full knowledge of all that is taking place, a copy of that statement is being enclosed with this letter. Please study it carefully.

But it is not merely action on the part of the N.A.C. that is so urgently necessary. Every Branch, every member, has jobs to do. Here are some of them—discuss the question in detail and you will work out other useful action.

1. There MUST be a flood of protests to the Spanish Embassy, 24 Belgrave Square, London, S.W.1. These protests should start with every Party Branch and, so far as possible, one from individual Party members. Then, if the Party is worth its salt, the protests will extend to working class organisations of every description. The matter must be raised inside every working class branch from now on until McNair is released, wherever we have a member or a sympathetic contact. Report all protests immediately to the "New Leader". Here are points to make in the protest—I put them in this way deliberately so that each protest will be worded differently:
  - i. McNair was arrested while he was acting as the official representative of the I.L.P. in Spain. The I.L.P. is one of the few British working class bodies that has worked strenuously in the cause of the fight against Franco;
  - ii. The charge against McNair is not true. The money sent out to him was for the purpose of repatriating members of the I.L.P. contingent who have been wounded or who have served the term of service for which they volunteered;
  - iii. Any accusation that McNair is a Trotskyist is false. He acts on behalf of the I.L.P. which repudiates Trotskyism and is repudiated by the Trotskyists;
  - iv. The effect of McNair's arrest will be to repel those who are most active in Gt. Britain in the fight against Fascism, especially after the case of Bob Smillie which has already caused deep resentment;
  - v. There is suspicion that the Spanish Government only tolerates non-Socialist political viewpoints and that all genuine Socialists who dare to

express their views are in danger of arrest.

2. Our open-air propaganda MUST be widely extended and the full Party case on Spain and in opposition to the Communist Party line must be stated bluntly. Every Branch should run at least one open-air meeting per week; part of the meeting should deal with the issue of Spain on the basis of the declaration of policy at Annual Conference and policy statements in the "New Leader" subsequently. Until he is released, McNair's case should be stated and efforts should be made to secure from members of the audience action along the lines of point 1 (see first page).
3. In view of the Liberal/Communist Press campaign, the "New Leader" and the Party pamphlets on Spain must have a greatly extended sale. Our printed propaganda reaches all too few and, in a crisis such as the present, that failure is a bitter handicap. Concentrate on the "New Leader" and "The Truth About Barcelona". Sell them at the open-air meetings, canvass for them, get them circulating in the workshops. When the new Guild of Youth pamphlet—"We Carry On" by Dan McArthur—comes out, add that to the list.

In addition to this action make the attempt to set up in your locality a broad Defence of P.O.U.M. Committee drawn from all sections of the working class movement which are sympathetic. Through this Committee organise local propaganda and publicity along the general lines of the points raised in this letter.

Enclosed with this letter you will find a new leaflet issued in connection with the big national effort to reorganise the Guild of Youth. You will remember that this was an Annual Conference decision and it is your duty to take on the job as thoroughly as the N.A.C. is doing. Copies of the leaflet can be had at 2s 6d. per thousand from the Socialist Bookshop, 35 St. Bride Street, London, E.C.4. They will be invaluable to you in building up a Guild in your locality.
4. This issue brings the struggle with the Communist Party to the point where the gloves are off. That does not mean reckless, unguarded statements—our case is sound and does not need that. It is the C.P. that is resorting more and more recklessly to *wild charges which its leaders know are utterly false*. Our task is to face the membership of the C.P. and of the rest of the movement with the truth. For this purpose a draft letter is attached. Use this to draw up a statement to send to your local Communist Party and consider inviting them, as suggested in the letter, to (a) a public debate, (b) an open or closed joint meeting of the two Parties to discuss the Spanish issue and the arrest of McNair, or (c) if they will not do either of those, to have a discussion on our case. Enclose with it a copy of "The Truth About Barcelona" and this week's "New Leader".
5. Follow this up by getting publicity in the local Press. Send copies of your covering letters. Secondly, get publicity in the local Labour Party, the T.U.'s. and the Co-ops.

The whole Party will be indignant at this most recent development of the "sell-out" of the Spanish workers by the Liberal/Communist Government at

Valencia. That indignation must find expression in concrete and constructive form. The release of our Comrade McNair and the awakening of the British working class to the real position is how we can do that. Fenner Brockway, leaving for Spain, expressed to me his over-whelming confidence as to how the Party would react. I believe he was right—that is why I have gladly undertaken the job at his request of getting this out to the Branches and members.

Yours fraternally,

JOHN APLIN

for FENNER BROCKWAY

P.S.

If McNair's release, however, is notified during the next day or two, alter the form of your protest to one of a general nature against the arrest of representatives of McNair's character.

J.A.

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### INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY

.....Branch

Communist Party

Sent to all C.P. Branches by local I.L.P. Branch Secy's June 1937

Dear Comrades,

The position in Spain must be as disturbing to you as it is to us and we write to you in the hope that recent critical developments which effect the whole working class movement of the world can be discussed between us and before the whole working class.

The position has become more critical for us in the I.L.P. by two events which have affected two of our most respected members. The first was the arrest of Bob Smillie, grandson of the great Miners' leader, his subsequent detention in prison for weeks without trial, and then his death—reported to be a result of peritonitis. The charge levelled against him by the Valencia Government was that he was attempting to take bombs out of Spain. A moment's reflection shows that the bombs must have been useless, for he could never have got live bombs through the British Customs—and he was on his way home. We would add that Bob Smillie had served for three months at the Front and was the official representative of the I.L.P. Guild of Youth, of which he was the National Chairman.

The second personal instance is the commencement of proceedings against the official I.L.P. representative in Spain—Comrade John McNair. Reports state that he is accused of giving money to the P.O.U.M. Red Aid and of acting as a courier for the P.O.U.M. In actual fact, the money referred to was sent out to Comrade McNair by the I.L.P. to use on behalf of the I.L.P. contingent in Spain, wounded members of which have been recently brought home by that money.

But, to us, these personal issues arise from a far greater issue. We in the I.L.P. feel that the present Spanish Government is departing from the working-class revolution which we believe to be the only alternative to Fascism. The P.O.U.M. (which, far from being a Trotskyist organisation has been denounced both by Trotsky and by the Trotskyist International Secretariat) is the Spanish I.L.P., yet its leading members have all been arrested as Fascist spies. However much you disagree with the I.L.P. in this country, would you be ready to believe that men like Maxton, McGovern and Brockway were agents of Mosley? Yet that would be just as possible as the accusations against Gorkin and Nin, the leaders of the Spanish I.L.P., which are published in the "Daily Worker."

Side by side with these arrests of P.O.U.M. leaders and I.L.P. representatives (it is significant that these arrests are not allowed to be reported in the Spanish papers!) the Government has become more and more Right Wing. It is now composed of Liberals, Autonomists, Right Wing Labour of the Herbert Morrison-Citrine-Bevin type, and Communist Party. The Left Wing, the Trade Unions and even Caballero, so recently the hero of the "Daily Worker"—have been thrown out. Working-class control of the army and of the police has gone and non-political police and army officers take the vacant place. Equality of pay in the army has given way to a system by which high ranked officers get a hundred times more than the private. These officers are recruited from the old time regular army officers. Collectivisation of the land has ceased. Is this Communism? Is it the policy of Marx and Lenin? We say No!

Above all, the Spanish Government, supported by the Communist Party, declares that Socialism is not the issue—that the fight in Spain is a fight between Capitalist Democracy and Fascism. We in this country live in a Capitalist Democracy but there is not a member of either the C.P. or the I.L.P. who does not recognise that Fascism may come in this country arising out of the failure of Capitalist Democracy to keep Capitalism going. The same would be true in Spain. That is why the I.L.P. and P.O.U.M. maintain that the only alternative to Fascism is working-class power and Socialism. And that is our crime, the reason why Bob Smillie, John McNair, Gorkin, Nin and the others are arrested.

You may not agree. We, therefore, invite you to debate this subject with us publicly, or to hold a joint meeting for comradely discussion. We shall be delighted to thrash this matter out with you, whether in public or not. We hope that in any case you will discuss our statement and, for that purpose, we enclose copies of the "New Leader" and of our most recent pamphlet in which our viewpoint is expressed more fully than is possible in a letter.

With Socialist greetings,

Yours fraternally,

Branch Secretary

Published by Greater Manchester Branch of Independent Labour Publications,  
36 Robinson Street, Edgeley, Stockport. and printed by National Labour Press  
Ltd., 49 Top Moor Side, Leeds LS11 9LW.