

The Marxist

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(Extract From Making of the Black Working Class in Britain)

Saklatvala played a glorious role as one of the pioneers of the international working class movement. If, as Lenin said, 'Capital is an international force. Its defeat requires an international brotherhood', then Saklatvala symbolised such an international brotherhood of workers. R. Palme Dutt recognised him as a heroic figure who fought on many fronts: for international communism, for Indian national liberation and for the causes of the British working class movement. Indeed, he became the first Indian to be accepted and loved by British workers.

His development from capitalism to Communism reflects a spiritual odyssey. From a wealthy family background, he was able to make a passionate commitment towards finding a means to end the poverty and misery of the masses in India. As he told Palme Dutt, there were four stages in this spiritual odyssey. First he sought in religion the key that would unlock the door to a new awakening and advance of the nation. He realised, however, that instead of providing a solution, religion led only to passivity and a sanctifying of the existing unacceptable order of society. Second, he turned to science as a means of helping the Indian people. After years of scientific studies (and having been an active welfare worker in the plague hospitals and slums of Bombay) he found that science alone offered no solution unless it was applied in practice to the economy. Third, he felt that in order to end Indian poverty, industrial development was necessary. This led to the establishment of the Tata iron and steel industry in India. Soon, however, his open advocacy of Indian national liberation ran afoul of the authorities. Consequently, the Tata firm sent him to Britain as their departmental manager. Finally, to climax his spiritual pilgrimage, he entered the world of the National Liberal Club, but quickly found among its members a narrow outlook and snobbish hypocrisy. After confrontation with Morley, then Secretary of State for India, he gravitated towards British working class politics.

Saklatvala was born on 28 March 1874 in Bombay. Since the 1830s

the Saklatvala family was a well-known parsee family in Bombay. He was intensely sensitive to human suffering. Thus, in spite of being born with 'a silver spoon in his mouth' he moved inevitably towards the working masses and a radical ideology. After leaving college, he was devoted to industry and was instrumental in setting up the Tata Iron and Steel works under the guidance of his maternal uncle, J.N. Tata. During this time, there was rising national consciousness in India. The Indian National Congress, already established in 1855, sought British goodwill in order to redress Indian grievances. Saklatvala's interest in politics which brought him in conflict with the British authorities, embarrassed the Tatas. To forestall growing militant nationalism in Bengal and elsewhere in India, British force became more repressive. After this transitional period in Indian politics, Saklatvala began his political life in England.

He interestingly moved from being a Liberal (believing in British goodwill) to an 'arch-enemy' of British imperialism. Indeed, he bravely held on to this uncompromising commitment and attacked imperialism 'in the heart of its stronghold'. After a brief spell of work in the Tata's Manchester office, he came to London where his especially concerned family made him a life-member of the National Liberal Club. This concern was essentially that Saklatvala would become 'respectable' by meeting 'friends' of Indian freedom. Among those whom he met was Lord Morley of the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909 (which arrived 'to rally the moderates' in the face of militant nationalism) that contributed towards the division of Indian nationalism along communal lines through the introduction of separate Hindu and Muslim electorates.

Saklatvala saw this division and its implications clearly and did not deviate from his argument, which was further strengthened by his familiarity with Liberal bankruptcy and hypocrisy concerning the true interests of the Indians. An argument with 'Honest Jack' Morley, resulted in Saklatvala's resignation and his departure from the liberal 'mausoleum'. In 1910 he entered British working class politics through the Independent Labour Party.

Involvement in the ILP proved an unsatisfactory experience. Saklatvala was disappointed by the Party's gradual shift from being Marxist to anti-Marxist. He was in fact in search of a group of true internationalists. Narrow nationalism was redundant; he sought support for the national liberation movement in India. Thus, the ILP was found wanting in that (though championing the cause of British

workers) it did not attack the cause of capitalist exploitation and failed to link the British working class with the international working-class movement. To Saklatvala, India's oppression was clearly linked to British capitalists and their exploitation through British imperialism. This belief received a filip in 1917 when the Russian Revolution stirred his imagination and pointed to the possibilities. According to one biographer, he saw this as the precursor to 'a new civilisation -- a new social order' which would, in the end, bring liberation to the exploited millions living under the heels of capitalism and imperialism. Alerted to the dangers of the Russian Revolution and its effect on working class and colonial national liberation movements, predictably the British imperialists used every means to discredit it. But in the wave of anti-Soviet propaganda, Saklatvala and others tried to present the other side of the story before the British public. He consolidated his position in 1918 by joining the People's Russian Information Bureau, which spread the message of the Russian Revolution.

At the war's end, the Russian Revolution had the beneficial effect of engendering hope in British and colonial liberation movements. Indeed, colonial working-class movements became more assertive, leading to widespread disturbances in 1919. These colonial developments were not lost on Lenin who formed the Third International in 1919. Saklatvala's response was that the ILP should be affiliated to the Third International to work towards the unity of the workers of the world. This proposal was not accepted by the ILP. Frustrated, Saklatvala moved irrevocably towards the ideals of the Communist Party, which he joined in 1921. To his lasting credit, he remained a Party member to his death.

Three years after the Russian Revolution, the Communist Party of Great Britain was founded at a time of growing militant activities in the trade union movement. The central political struggle during this new era of militant working class struggle in Britain was support for the new Russian Republic. Thus, the Hands Off Russia Committee established in Britain in the spring of 1919 inaugurated a campaign against British intervention. Moreover, in April 1919, the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party at a joint conference called for the withdrawal of British troops from Russia. Further, the British government's ultimatum to the Soviet Union resulted in radical elements in the British working class threatening a general strike.

Both the Amritsar Massacre and suppression of the Egyptian

national liberation movement drew protest from the young Communist Party and from the Labour Left. In the CP Saklatvala found what he was looking for: an organisation which took a strong stand on international solidarity on national liberation and for ending exploitation.

According to one observer, it is no exaggeration to claim that Saklatvala was a product of the British working-class movement. Indeed, his devotion to this movement was undoubted. Historically, this international aspect of working-class unity was a continuing theme of the British working class movement. In the struggle for the reform of Parliament, the London Workingmen's Association was formed 'to secure political rights for the workers after the failure to win working-class representation in 1832'. In fact, it was this organisation which in 1838 produced the People's Charter, which in turn became the rallying point for a revolutionary movement which, at the outset, recognised the working-class struggle as an international one.

Soon after Saklatvala came to England, he took an interest in the trade union movement. After joining the CP he became a keen and active trade union member. This involvement was noted by the Daily Worker: 'Night after night, year after year, in all parts of Britain he carried out his task of working class agitation, education and organisation. No comrade ever did more of his work so uncomplainingly as comrade Saklatvala No call was ever made upon (him) to which he did not respond. In spite of bad health, a 'dicky' heart, he displayed unusual vitality. This unselfish commitment was observed by both organisers and workers. He cared about reaching the workers, travelling widely on speaking tours and sleeping rough 'even on the floor of the corridor in a crowded train -- certainly never in a first class sleeper'. Soon this dedication brought him deserved recognition from British workers. This was evident when Saklatvala was able to draw a crowd of 1500 people, while one of the Blackshirt 'stars' spoke to a 'small audience'. In fact, as soon as Saklatvala began speaking, the small crowd deserted the Fascist and turned to listen to the Communist.

Saklatvala's involvement in the trade union movement had deepened over the years, forming the essential base of his politics. Indeed, he was not only an active member of the Central Workers' Union, he also joined the Clerks' Union and the Co-operative Union. Moreover, he was elected as a delegate by the Trades Union Congress of India

to represent them at various trade union congresses in England. His popularity among rank and file workers had grown enormously.

In the General Election of October 1922 he contested the seat of Battersea North. His candidature aroused much debate and discussion. Eventually, however, he received the support of the Battersea Trades and Labour Council, and the endorsement of the Labour Party NEC. It was agreed that Saklatvala should run as a Labour candidate. Indeed, he pledged himself publicly to support the Labour Party's Constitution and policy. In his election address, he wrote:

In spite of desperate and ludicrous efforts on the part of Liberals and Tories alike to split the Working Class Movement into hostile fragments, THE LABOUR PARTY IS TODAY THE ONLY PARTY IN GREAT BRITAIN THAT STANDS SOLIDLY TOGETHER. The scare-cry of 'Communist' which is sure to be raised by eleventh-hour leaflets will fortunately not frighten the electors of North Battersea.....

This statement is understandable, given the fact that those were the years when the CP was trying to obtain affiliation to the Labour Party. In fact, at this time, Saklatvala's statements and general attitude towards the Labour Party were fundamentally in line with Communist Party policy. During this campaign he found in Mrs Charlotte Despard a most active supporter. Saklatvala won the seat by a clear majority of 2000 votes but lost it in the November 1923 Election, by a narrow margin. In the interval between the 1923 election and that of 1924, which brought the first minority Labour Government to an end, the Labour Conference of October 1924 banned Communists from standing as Labour candidates, and excluded individual Communists from Labour Party membership. Saklatvala, who had attended this conference as the St Pancras Labour Party delegate was, in effect, forced to contest the Battersea North seat as a Communist candidate in 1924. With the overwhelming support of the Battersea North LP, he narrowly defeated his Liberal opponent to win the seat in the Zinoviev Letter election.

During both terms as an MP, Saklatvala worked closely with the left-wing Scottish ILP members. With his broad outlook, he emphasised the connection between the workers' struggle in different parts of

the Empire. Naturally, he was concerned with the problems of colonial workers and peasants, particularly those in India. There were two organisations in Britain which provided connections between the British Labour movement and India. There was, of course, Annie Besant's Home Rule League. Towards the close of the First World War, the League had aroused support for its aims among ILP branches and trades councils in Yorkshire, South Wales and in some of the larger industrial towns.

Although Saklatvala was a member of the Home Rule League, he sought to fill another need by forming the Workers' Welfare League in 1916. Its original aim, to work with Indian seamen in London, was broadened to include matters affecting the working conditions of all groups of Indian workers. Moreover, when the All-India Trades Union Congress (AITUC) was established in 1921, the Workers' Welfare League became its agent in Britain. Apart from Saklatvala, among the WWL's leading members during its early years, were Arthur Pugh (until about 1924) J. Potter Wilson and George Lansbury. Predictably, given Saklatvala's political perspective, by the mid-1920s the WWL was identified with the Communists and the Left generally. After the political rupture of the 1926 General Strike, the League's shift to the left was viewed with considerable hostility by both the Labour Party leadership and the TUC General Council. If Saklatvala's activities in Britain were monitored, thereafter, he was closely watched.

Apart from being a black Communist MP in Britain, his political career had always been controversial. However, he remained undeterred in his passion to end oppression. During this turbulent period, he played a full part in the many industrial and political disputes. As an outsider, he was the perfect scapegoat. In October 1921, his home was searched; in 1925, although appointed a member of the British delegation to the Inter-parliamentary Union Congress in Washington, the American Secretary of State revoked his visa; and on the first day of the General Strike (4 May 1926) he was arrested and charged with sedition for a speech he made on May Day urging the Army not to fire on the people. Forty years later, a Sunday Times writer described Saklatvala as one of the instigators of the General Strike. In the face of this onslaught, he remained unbowed. He refused to be bound over and was sentenced to two months' imprisonment, which was served in Wormwood Scrubs. Moreover, during the period of his arrest and trial, his home (and those of other well-known Communists) was again raided. These experiences seemed to have strengthened Saklatvala's resolve. After his release

he continued to be active by addressing meetings on behalf of the locked-out miners. His imprisonment in Britain served only to heighten the struggle of workers elsewhere in the Empire.

Since he settled in England, he had been back to India three times: in 1912-13 (a family visit), in 1913-14 by himself; and finally (after some difficulty in getting permission to enter the country) he arrived in Bombay on 14 January 1927. On his third visit, he received a hero's welcome from most sections of the Indian nationalists. Like Gandhi, he supported organised labour in South Africa and directed attention to the need for trade union and peasant organisations. Moreover, he attended the AITUC Conference as a fraternal delegate, was officially welcomed by several large municipal corporations, and addressed huge audiences. Whilst the official authorities tried to divide the people, he appealed for communal unity in the essential struggle for an independent India. In this, he urged the left to work within the Congress Party. His experience and involvement with British working-class politics made his appeal to the Indian people more passionate and memorable. He was fully aware of Gandhi's presence and influence. Before he left India, he published an Open Letter to Gandhi whose policies he severely criticised. In the correspondence between them, Gandhi's reply was published on 17 March 1927 in the Bombay Daily Mail. More letters passed between them, all of which were published in 1970. During this last visit, Saklatvala spent three months in India.

When he returned to Britain, India became a no-go area -- it was excluded from the list of countries for which his passport was valid. He became so dangerous that he was refused entry to Egypt on his way to India. As he found out, his real enemies, ironically, were Labour members such as Wedgwood Benn, Secretary of State for India and Arthur Henderson, Foreign Secretary, who upheld the ban on his entry into India when the Labour Party was returned to office in 1929. He was also refused admission into Belgium in 1929, while on his way to attend a League Against Imperialism meeting. The League had an important bearing on Saklatvala's politics. Earlier in February 1926, the League was founded after meetings in Berlin and Brussels. Thereafter the organisation became the League Against Imperialism, with George Lansbury as Chairman. After his resignation, two months later, James Maxton replaced him. Willi Munzenburg became one of the two international secretaries, and Jawaharlal Nehru, Saklatvala and Diego Riviera of Mexico were members of the Executive Committee. Reginald Bridgeman, the former British Foreign Office diplomat, was secretary of the British

section. Clearly, the LAI was not popular with the world's press or the Indian government which banned all its literature. More witch-hunting was to come. In January 1929, Saklatvala, Maxton, Bridgeman, A.J. Cook and Alex Gossip, on their way to attend a meeting of the League in Cologne, arrived in Ostend where Cook and Gossip were allowed to continue their journey, while the other three were arrested and sent back to Britain. Saklatvala, with no illusions, was right about the international conspiracy of capital.

Unfortunately at this time, the political divisions on the left had hit a new low. Before the Communist International had taken a hard line against reformism Saklatvala had already been critical of the Labour Party. He argued that since the Party had turned itself into a liberal reformist group, the CP, given that it was the only anti-capitalist party, should seek trade union affiliations. Moreover, at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1928, Saklatvala, with R. Palme Dutt and Harry Pollitt, demanded a radical change in policy. This was achieved at the eleventh Congress held between November and December 1929 at Leeds. Earlier, in the General Election of 1929, Saklatvala lost his seat to the Labour candidate, who polled twice as many votes. The following year, Saklatvala stood again in a by-election in Shuttleston, Glasgow, but lost. In 1931, he again contested a Battersea seat, but failed miserably, polling only half the number of votes he had received in 1929. It was a sound victory for the Conservative candidate, and a reflection that the political tide had turned their way.

During the remaining years of his life, Saklatvala kept up a gruelling schedule, speaking at meetings across the country. Among others he was particularly concerned with unemployment, the central issue at the time. Together with Reg Bishop, his friend and secretary, he visited the Soviet Union for the third time. he was impressed by the changes he had seen among the non-Russian peoples in central Asia. A year later, he was again active in electioneering. This time, he campaigned for Harry Pollitt in the Rhondda, and Willie Gallacher in West Fife. Indeed, he continued to address meetings until two weeks before his death from a heart attack on 16 June 1936.