

THE POPULAR FRONT

FOR THE PEOPLE'S FRONT IN ENGLAND

By H. Pollitt

THE great successes won by the French and Spanish People's Fronts at the recent general elections in those countries have had a far-reaching effect on public opinion in Great Britain.

In practically every progressive newspaper, with the exception, of course, of the "Daily Herald," there began to appear articles, editorials, and letters dealing with the question of whether, and if so, in what form, it is possible to establish a People's Front in Britain.

The discussion began immediately after the results of the French general election were known. It was further stimulated by the subsequent formation of the Leon Blum Government in France.

The whole feeling that it is high time something of a similar character to the French and Spanish Popular Fronts was organised in Britain was, however, encouraged most of all by the stirring events which have taken place in France *since* the elections.

Progressive opinion in Britain, and especially the great majority of the members of the organised Labour movement witnessed, with amazement, the striking victories won by the working people of France in the wave of strikes which swept the country from end to end. They realised the tremendous changes that must come about in the conditions of life of the French nation. They watched, astonished, the unprecedented influx of new members to the trade unions. They sensed the new life, the new strength, and the new hope, that were transforming the French Labour movement. They contrasted all these happenings with the state of affairs in Britain and there began to be voiced the demand that steps, similar to those taken by the workers and professional people in France and Spain, should be taken in Britain to end the intolerable situation existing there.

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If the basis of the demand for a People's Front in Britain is clearly to be understood, it must be realised that the National Government is now recognised to be a government of social reaction by an ever-growing section of the population; that the foreign policy of this self-styled National Government—with its past support for the military-fascist ruling clique in Japan, its gross betrayal of the Abyssinian people, and its open assistance and encouragement of Hitler Germany

—is recognised as a policy directly menacing the peace of the world.

Although the General Election in Britain, at which this ill-disguised Tory government of Baldwin was returned, took place only last November, no other government, at least in modern times it is safe to say, has so rapidly and so completely discredited itself in the eyes of the millions of those who voted it into office.

In this situation it is felt, and rightly so, that there exists an unrivalled opportunity, providing all those who are opposed to it are organised within a common front, of sweeping it finally away.

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Unfortunately, the basic weakness in the stand-point of most of those who think along these lines is that they regard this "common front" purely as an electoral agreement arrived at by consultations between the leaders of the Liberal and Labour Parties.

In the Liberal press, particularly, this question is receiving considerable attention.

There are some who see in this fact a deep-laid plot on the part of the Liberal leaders to make use of the growing feeling that a Popular Front is necessary in Britain in order to revive the fortunes, or, at least, prolong the life, of a dying Liberal Party.

I do not accept this idea.

I believe that at bottom, the attention which the question of a Popular Front in Britain is receiving in the Liberal press reflects the attitude of that large body of progressive opinion which is outside the Labour movement.

On the whole the people composing this section of the population are profoundly alarmed at the national and international situation. These people have a very sincere desire to do something practical to help defeat the National Government, to improve the conditions of the majority of the people at home and to organise all peace-loving people into a single movement aimed at preventing war.

But desire, goodwill and sincerity are not enough.

Both the end and the means by which it is to be achieved, must be crystal clear, and the unity must be a united struggle of aim and method and not merely one of good intent. It goes without

saying that any attempt to establish the People's Front in England must pay attention first and foremost to the existing movement among the people for peace. This movement, its successes and defects must without fail occupy the centre of the attention of all who support the People's Front. The movement for peace led by the National Peace Council, covers very wide sections of people, and its dimensions are on a scale unheard of in England. Why has this movement been passive in all the critical situations which have arisen recently? Because there is no clarity inside this movement on the question of the ways and means to be adopted in the struggle for peace. Everybody wants peace. But there is the greatest disagreement as to how to maintain peace.

The Communist Party, which wishes to see the whole of the people of Britain on the march against the National Government and the policy it is pursuing, in fighting the confusion about, and distortion of, the nature of the Popular Front, which if not eliminated, will actually retard the movement.

It is not sufficient to be inspired by the successes of the People's Front in France and Spain. It is necessary to *understand how* they were made possible.

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That a widespread confusion as to how a real fighting People's Front can be developed in Britain does exist at the present time, can be shown by a few extracts from articles and letters which have appeared in the press.

"I am by no means suggesting the expediency of a Liberal-Labour alliance. Far from it; parliamentary Liberalism is highly unpromising material for any Front Populaire designed to further a constructive policy. I have in mind rather a more open friendly and collaborative attitude towards individuals at present outside the Labour ranks, but largely at one with the immediate objectives of Labour Policy."

(G. D. H. Cole, *New Statesman*, 9 May, 1936.)

"The one consolation in a long-distance view to be drawn from a break-down in this sense of the sham 'National' front would be the stimulus it might give to the formation of a great Popular Front in this country.

"The present Government totters, without falling, from one shock to another largely because of a general disbelief in the ability of the Labour Opposition to provide a more efficient alternative. Labour politicians, aware of the handicap, are beginning now to talk among themselves in terms of a Popular Front.

"But to-day thoughtful politicians, ranging from the extreme Socialist Left to the extreme Conservative Left, see in the establishment of a well-organised Popular Front the best hope—if not the sole hope—of fighting reaction, building up a staunch system of social justice and making democracy secure."

(A. J. Cummings, *News Chronicle*, 11 May, 1936.)

"The conception of a Popular Front in Britain is beginning already to capture the popular imagination.

It may well be that in the next few years political history will be transformed through the mobilisation on a few simple issues on the one front of all the forces of progress whether inside or outside existing parties.

"But there is no room for delay. A neglected opportunity may be lost for a generation."

(Leading article, *News Chronicle*, 14 May, 1936.)

"But advocates of a Popular Front (or Peace Front as I have termed it elsewhere) may at least urge that, while consolidating the progressive forces in this country—which obstinately adheres to a Two Party system—it combines satisfaction for the demand for a united workers' movement with the prospect of such an enlargement of voting support as may make feasible the acquisition of power and prevent the rot setting in of Liberal-Unionism. It may even contribute a temporary bridge over which battalions, at present detached, may join forces with, and accept the discipline of, the Labour Party."

(Professor Catlin, *New Statesman*, 16 May, 1936.)

"At that time, 1931, it seemed clear to me that we must . . . protect our democratic system by a Popular Front on the right.

"To-day the opposite is true. We can only protect democracy and get the chance to reorganise our national life by a Popular Front on the Left. I believe that ultimately the Labour Party will have the imagination to realise that they must take the lead in bringing this Popular Front into being, just as we witnessed it being done in France."

(Lord Allen of Hurtwood, *Sunday Express*, 24 May, 1936.)

"It is equally clear that there is every chance of winning a number of seats from the government if there would be an electoral arrangement between the Parties of the Left.

"Unite the divided radical vote, harness the new ideas of other groups, draw in the new men who are agreed on the vital questions of the day, and you have the end of the reaction in Great Britain.

"It remains only for reason to triumph over dogma and for loyalty to a political and humanistic ideal to extort temporary sacrifices from the political machines of the Left."

(Arthur Greenwood, *News Chronicle*, 28 May, 1936.)

Such expressions are typical of what is now appearing on the subject of the People's Front in the Liberal and Liberal-Labour press.

In this situation, one might have thought that it should have been the duty of the "Daily Herald," as the mouthpiece of the official Labour Movement in Britain, to have given a clarifying lead on the question.

As it was, the most complete silence was observed, only to be broken when those who are responsible for the policy of this paper saw an opportunity to deliver just another of those vicious and criminal stabs which are preserved specially for any manifestation of mass struggle and militant advance.

At the decisive moment in the great strike movement which swept France, the direct result

of the election successes of the People's Front, the "Daily Herald" wrote:—

"The French workers will be wise enough not to lessen the capacity of their Government to continue in that progress.

"At the moment there is some danger of playing into the hands of reaction.

"Electors will not be encouraged, either in France or anywhere else, to return Left Governments if their success is immediately marked by widespread economic disturbances and an interruption in the supply of daily necessities."

(Leading article, *Daily Herald*, 6 June, 1936.)

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Two main weaknesses are to be noted in the views expressed in the above quotations.

Firstly, while these views are the direct consequence of *recent* events in France and Spain, no understanding is shown of *past* events, of the stages in the development of the People's Front in these countries.

Secondly, the Popular Front is conceived of primarily as an *electoral bloc* between what are commonly described as "The progressive elements in the Labour and Liberal Parties."

So far as the first weakness is concerned, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the People's Front in both France and Spain, only came into existence *after a united working-class front had been achieved between, and carried out in practice by, the Communist and Socialist Parties in these countries*.

The successes attending this working class *unity of action*, the enthusiasm and power which it generated and the salutary check which it imposed upon the hitherto advancing fascism, at once attracted the attention and sympathy of those sections of the population—peasants, middle class and professional people—that were outside the working-class movement.

These at once began to demand that their own organisations should be identified with the united working class movement.

And it was at this moment that the Communist Party of France, displaying exemplary initiative, proposed the formation of the People's Front for bread, freedom and peace.

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There are some people in Britain who are, at present, arguing that there are purely "British ways" of achieving here what has been done in France.

We Communists agree that all policy must be formulated according to the actual conditions of the country to which that policy is designed to apply. We Communists are well aware that in different countries, just as in different situations in the same country, different tactics may be

necessary. The character and the concrete forms of the People's Front in England will of course be determined by the special English conditions.

But on some issues there are fundamental principles which cannot be ignored, fundamental principles upon the recognition of which any successful effort depends.

One of these is involved here.

We can state it briefly in this way:

Until the working class organisations achieve unity in action, a united front directed against the advance of fascism, directed against social reaction and the threat of war, no real success can be achieved by any combination calling itself a "People's Front" or anything else, for that matter.

This is especially so in the case of a country such as Britain, where the working class constitute the majority of the population. This, of course, does not mean that we adhere to any kind of theory to the effect that there are certain stages which must of necessity be passed through in the establishment of the People's Front. We perfectly well understand that the organisations of the working class are not at all separated by a Chinese wall from the wide movements against war and fascism, the initiative for which does not come from these organisations. Neither do we imagine that the People's Front in England has, of necessity, to be built up in England in the same chronological order as in France and Spain. But unless united action by the working class is achieved, the People's Front cannot become a decisive force and achieve the necessary success in England.

We, who see the need for a People's Front in Britain, should be committing a very serious political mistake if we were to shirk the struggle to overcome the opposition of the Labour leaders to the united working-class front, the essential condition for the creation of a genuine People's Front, and to take refuge in general talk about some vague People's Front.

And at this point it is necessary to point to the contrast between the experiences in the general election in France and that in Belgium.

In France the anti-fascist progressive forces won striking successes because the People's Front there is based primarily upon the united working class front achieved by the French Socialist and Communist Parties.

In Belgium, the Labour leaders refused a united front with the Communists. There was in consequence no People's Front. As a result, the fascists gained important successes in both the general and the more recent municipal elections, and the Belgian Labour Party lost heavily. The Communist Party which carried through its election

campaign under the slogans of the united and people's front met with great success.

The failure of the Belgian working class to achieve unity in action has prevented the creation of an anti-fascist People's Front, and has lead to an advance of fascism in Belgium, and, because of the strategical importance of Belgium in Europe, has increased still further the serious menace to the peace of the world.

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In all countries fascism attempts to find support among the middle class and professional section of the population.

The economic crisis and the subsequent depression have hit this section almost as hard as the working class.

The terrible consequences of fascism in Germany, and the fact that Fascist Germany is now the chief danger to the peace of the world, have undoubtedly made a profound impression upon this section of the population of Britain.

They are equally alarmed at the reactionary policy of the discredited National Government.

It is possible and desirable to form a fighting alliance with all these people, but the interpretation of the Popular Front repeated in the views expressed above, would defeat the aims which many who earnestly desire united action against the National Government have in mind.

The experience of other countries shows that the most decisive factor in the establishment of such an alliance is the resolute action of the united working class movement against fascism and reaction — action which, in defending the workers' interests, will also defend the interests of the middle class and professional people against the big trusts, landlords and bankers.

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Turning now to the second weakness in the views expressed, I must stress straightaway that, both in Spain and in France, the People's Front did *not* start as an electoral combination, but as a mass movement which was repeatedly in action before electoral agreements and election victories became possible. There is an exceptionally favourable situation in England for the establishment of such a mass movement. The movement for peace, which covers millions of people, and is immensely popular throughout the country, is the corner-stone of a broad People's Front.

The ground for the People's Front has been prepared. It only depends on whether the organisations of the working class arrive at agreement and establish united action, whether the feeling of the people for the establishment of a broad People's Front will be established in England.

With the United Front of the Communist and Socialist Parties as its indestructible core, the People's Front in France grew up on the basis of local, divisional and national co-ordinating committees of action, which organised mass activity (i.e., meetings, marches, demonstrations) against the fascist organisations and for a programme aimed at relieving poverty, reducing unemployment, and drastically curbing the power of the bankers and armament firms.

That is why the great People's Front demonstrations, such as that of July 14, 1935, when 800,000 citizens of Paris marched past the Bastille and then similar great gatherings which took place all over France, laid the firm basis for the mass movement which later defeated Laval, forced through the Franco-Soviet Pact, and achieved the victory over reaction in the general election.

That is why it was possible for the Leon Blum Government to come to office in France.

Even more significant was the march past the Wall of the Communards organised on May 24, 1936, by the Communist and Socialist Parties of France.

The march was expected to last five hours.

It actually took from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Why?

Because the middle class and professional people of Paris joined with the workers, marching behind the banners of the People's Front, and in particular, behind the banners of the ex-servicemen's contingents.

Then came the great strike wave, which has resulted in the magnificent victories for the industrial and black-coated workers, and in the unprecedented growth of militant trade unionism in France.

The moral of this is clear. The stronger the organised united working-class movement becomes, the more it attracts all those sections of the people which normally hold aloof from political activity, or fall under the influence of the reactionary bourgeoisie.

Therefore it would be fatal if we did not understand the decisive and leading importance of the working class united front.

This point of view is repeated and stressed in some of the contributions on the subject which have appeared in *Reynolds News*, the influential Sunday newspaper of the Co-operative movement.

The following quotations are indicative of this trend of opinion:

"A People's United Front in France has brought a great victory for democracy and Socialism . . .

"Working class unity has achieved two remarkable triumphs this year. France and Spain represent the new technique of the fight for Socialism and Peace . . .

"Let us, therefore, forget our sectarianism and unite on as wide a front as possible."
(Joseph Reeves, Secretary, Educational Dept. Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society, *Reynolds*, 24 May, 1936.)

"... Allow the dark forces that stand in the way of unity to prevail now, and the outlook for the workers would be black indeed.

"But the spirit of the Whitsuntide Conferences is fighting against those forces. 'Prevail they shall not,' it says. It demands prompt consultation between the chiefs of the Labour Party, the Co-operative movement, the Trade Unions. Bring in the Socialist League and the I.L.P. Do not leave out the Communists.

"They are not many in actual numbers, but their presence in the United Front would ensure its having certain clear-cut, vigorous aims. These would not be the precise aims of the Communist Party, but they would be energetic, practical.

"This is no moment for holding back because personal vanities may be affronted or personal interests imperilled. The tide is with us. For the first time in history of Labour we have the mass of intelligent opinion inclining to our side.

"There are signs everywhere of an honest, disinterested eagerness for a better state of society. The rapid success of the Russian experiment, turning to foolishness all the predictions of its early failure, has startled the world out of its conception of Socialism as an impossible dream. There is a magnificent chance for us, and also for our comrades in France, who evidently intend to take it."

(Hamilton Fyfe, *Reynolds News*, 7 June, 1936.)

"C.H.," in a long letter to the *New Statesman and Nation*, writes:—

Mr. Cole, in dismissing the idea of a Popular Front in the form of a Liberal-Labour alliance, seems to ignore entirely the existence of any other parties of the Left in this country.

"It is surely no secret that a large part of the driving force of the Popular Front in France and Spain has come from the Communist Party . . .

"I venture to hope that you will make it clear when you speak of a Popular Front you do not contemplate the possibility of its formation in this country any more than in France or Spain, without Communist support."

(*New Statesman*, 16 May, 1936.)

Very significant was the fact that, on June 12, the following letter appeared in the *Daily Herald*:

"The swift and decisive action of the People's Government in France should give rise to a serious thought among the leadership of the 'Left' and Radical elements in this country.

"We have got to rid ourselves of all the factions in the 'Left' and Radical movements and bring all these elements together.

"The question of a coalition of all these 'Left' and Radical elements is a matter for the immediate demands, which will rally all these elements together."

(Geo. Hindle: Political Agent, Warrington Trades Council and Labour Party, Editor of the *Warrington and District Labour News*.)

The people in Britain, who are anxious for a united effort to defeat the National Government, who are for achieving a great social programme to help the distressed areas; who are for the sup-

pression of Mosley's fascist blackguards; who are for close co-operation with the Soviet Union and with the Government which has come into being in France after the election victory as the only effective way of maintaining peace, should be doing everything possible to achieve these ends by using whatever influence they possess to bring pressure upon their friends in the Labour Party to end the stupid opposition to united action with the Communist Party.

It is this opposition to the establishment of the United Front which is the chief obstacle to any prospects of a People's Front in Britain. At the same time the reactionary elements who are resisting the United Front are thereby affording the strongest political support to those people whose policy is leading us towards war, for it is these people, and these alone, who profit by the divisions in the ranks of the working people. It is an opposition by leaders who are afraid of a United Front because they realise that a United Front means a front of struggle, because they realise that out of it will come a really powerful fighting People's Front, and out of that will come the defeat of the National Government. And it is that defeat which the reactionary Labour leaders are more afraid of than anything else in the world.

Some of them are terrified at the prospect of having to accept the responsibility of government should the National Government be defeated, for they understand that a People's Front like that of Spain and France would deal heavy blows against the warmakers.

For the great pressure which that People's Front will exert on the Labour Government will consolidate all the forces in Britain opposed to fascism and war. It will help to ease the tension of the present international situation. And of all these, the reactionary Labour leaders are terribly afraid.

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The task of healing the split in the ranks of the Labour movement in Britain is no light one. The task of creating a broad front of the British people against social reaction, against the enemies within the nation—the capitalist employers, the bankers, the landlords and their henchmen, is not one to be entered upon lightly. The future not only of the British people but of the peace of the world and of humanity itself depends upon how we go about it.

The Communist Party of Great Britain, fully conscious of this tremendous responsibility, does not underestimate the gravity of the situation.

Therefore, as the first step towards the realisation of united working class action, as the first

necessary step towards the establishment of a real People's Front in Britain, the Communist Party now seeks to become affiliated to the Labour Party.

At the time of writing (June 13) the fact that 905 local and national Labour Party and trade union organisations have declared their support for Communist affiliation, indicates that the real lesson of the events in France and Spain have, at least, not been lost upon the more far-seeing sections of the British Labour Movement.

It is worth while to note how wide and representative this support is already:

ANNUAL CONFERENCES:

Annual Conference, South Wales Miners' Federation.
Annual Conference, Associated Society Locomotive Engineers and Firemen.
Annual Conference, National Union of Clerks.
Furnishing Trades Association (National Ballot).
Annual Conference, Socialist League.
Annual Conference, Scottish Socialist Party.
Annual Conference, Scottish Co-operative Guilds.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES:

Executive Committee, Associated Society Locomotive Engineers and Firemen.
Executive Committee, Furnishing Trades Association.
National Council, Socialist League.

DISTRICT ORGANISATIONS:

District Trade Union Organisations	...	...	...	19
District Labour Party Organisations	...	...	...	7
District Co-operative Organisations	...	...	...	5

LOCAL ORGANISATIONS:

(Trade Unions)—				
Railwaymen's Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	171
Engineering Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	76
Miners' Lodges	...	...	...	69
Building Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	58
Transport Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	53
Distributive Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	35
Furnishing Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	25
Municipal Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	21
Other Trade Union Branches	...	...	...	44
(Labour Parties)—				
Local Labour Parties	...	...	...	57
Divisional Labour Parties	...	...	...	39
Ward Labour Parties	...	...	...	78
Trades and Labour Councils	...	...	...	31
Labour League of Youth Branches	...	...	...	23
Other Local Labour Bodies	...	...	...	26
(Co-operatives)—				
Local Co-operative Guilds and Political Councils	...	...	...	58
Total Trade Union Bodies	...	...	...	577
Total Labour Party Bodies	...	...	...	265
Total Co-operative Bodies	...	...	...	64
GRAND TOTAL—905 Organisations.*				

We can see from this that the framework of a People's Front is already being laid down in

*According to a report in the *Daily Worker* of June 15, the Annual Conference of the Fabian Society, whose members, as is well known, have long had great influence in the Labour Party, declared by an overwhelming majority in favour of accepting the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party.—Ed.

Britain, based upon the developing unity of the working class movement.

We say to those who desire to see a powerful People's Front established here: You can help materially in its realisation by assisting in the development of the working class united front and taking full part in all forms of united action against war and fascism.

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To put the issue of a Liberal-Labour electoral alliance as the beginning of a People's Front is to misunderstand the situation completely.

There is a basis for a People's Front in Great Britain.

But that basis is not the Parliamentary interests of the Liberal and Labour Parties.

It is the common interests of those whose lives and livelihood are threatened. The problem of wages of the workers, adequate relief and provision of work for the unemployed, the standards of life of the broad masses of working people, the possibility of progress and liberty, the preservation of peace, all of which are threatened by the National Government, are the foundations upon which a People's Front in Britain can alone be built.

Only if the people, the ordinary people, of our country are brought into *action* to check and reverse the present policy of our rulers can a Popular Front be established.

That primarily is the kernel of the problem in this country. To set the people in political motion. And to do this we must have a united Labour Party capable of arousing the flaming energy of the British people.

Why is the enthusiasm flagging?

Why is there such a contrast between the spirit of the movement at the time of the Socialist pioneers and to-day?

We say, frankly, it is because the Labour Party and the trade union leaders have abandoned the daily struggle for the class interests of the workers, and, by so doing, have reduced their Socialism to a series of phrases in which the workers no longer believe.

Why is it that the Communist Party is admitted on all sides to be the bearer of such energy and enthusiasm as in the Labour movement to-day?

Why do the workers crowd round the Communist meetings and voice their approval with cheers, while official Labour gatherings are half empty and dull?

Why does the ceaseless stream of Communist literature and books receive such a welcome while the production of an official Labour pamphlet is a rare event?

Why does unity and confidence reign in the Communist Party while in the Labour Party is increasing anger with the leadership?

The answer is to be found in the fact that the Communists constantly show in deeds that they stand for the United Front in defence of the immediate and future interests of the working class and all who stand for freedom and peace.

And that policy is the only one which can arouse the confidence and enthusiasm which are the forerunners of action.

The first beginnings of united action of the working class on a national scale, and thereby the forming of a force which can attract the other discontented sections of society into a common struggle, will be possible when, and only when, the policy, spirit and energy of the Communist Party are available to the whole Labour Movement.

It is in this sense that the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party is the decisive factor for the development of a real People's Front in Britain.

EDITOR'S NOTE.

The following is a list of organisations supporting Communist affiliation to the Labour Party up to August 6.

National Organisations

Miners' Federation of Great Britain (521,000 members).
Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (48,000 members).
Furnishing Trades Association (17,000 members).

National Union of Clerks (5,000 members).

Scottish Bakers' Union (8,000 members).

Amalgamated Engineering Union (145,951 members).

Socialist League.

Fabian Society.

Scottish Socialist Party.

Scottish Co-operative Guilds.

District Organisations

Trade Unions	43
Labour Party	8
Co-operative	7

Local Organisations (Trade Union)

Railwaymen	231
Engineering	99
Miners	97
Transport	85
Building	79
Distributive	56
Municipal	34
Furnishing	33
Electrical	25
Miscellaneous	44

Local Organisations (Labour)

Local Labour Parties	88
Divisional Labour Parties	60
Ward Labour Parties	124
Trades and Labour Councils	44
Labour League of Youth Branches	35
Other Local Labour Organisations	45

Local Organisations (Co-op.)

Local Guilds and Political Councils	80
Totals: Trade Union	831
Labour Party	407
Co-operative	88

GRAND TOTAL **1,326 organisations**