

## Leaders in the heyday of Britain's unions: Walter Citrine and Ernest Bevin

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### Introduction

Walter Citrine (1887-1983) is largely forgotten today, apart from for his indispensable guide to the conduct of meetings, the *ABC of Chairmanship*. Yet, along with Ernest Bevin, he was a towering figure in the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party at the height of their twentieth century power and influence in British society. The contrast with the position of today's TUC and Labour Party is stark, so it may be useful to learn how they did it.

Bevin is remembered as a giant but Citrine has gone completely out of favour. There are a number of reasons for this but the main one seems to be that he was caricatured by opponents as a 'grey, predictable, apparatchik figure', 'the super-bureaucrat'. Aneurin Bevan's sneer about Citrine, 'poor man, he suffers from files', was typical of the way in which he and others, like Michael Foot, sought to belittle someone whose vision and role was different from theirs.<sup>1</sup>

After the war, Citrine retired from the TUC, whereas Bevin held high Cabinet office as Foreign Secretary from 1945 until 1951. Bevin's achievements were deservedly but uncritically lauded by no less than three biographers soon after his death.<sup>2</sup> His close relationship with Clement Attlee ensured that he was given most of the credit for the unions' sterling role in the war effort. Though more 'right-wing' than Citrine, Bevin's prominence and achievements made him simply too big a target for 'the Left' to take on. Citrine's equally major contribution to government during the war as TUC General Secretary, Privy Counsellor and world wide Plenipotentiary (which we will see), soon faded in the public mind and he had no one to sing his praises once he left the Labour scene. Worse still, when the unions shifted leftwards from the late 1950s, it was Citrine who became 'fair-game' for those who thought they knew much better.

There have been recent attempts to redress the balance with valuable reassessments of Citrine's life and times.<sup>3</sup> In revisiting Citrine's achievement in a chapter of a forthcoming

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Foot's adulatory two volume biography of Aneurin Bevan (1962), especially volume 1, 178, 287 and 298-306, is full of such jibes.

<sup>2</sup> Trevor Evans: Ernest Bevin, (1946); Francis Williams: Ernest Bevin, Portrait of a Great Englishman, (1952) and Lord Alan Bullock: The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, vol.1 Trade Union Leader 1881-1940, (1960).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Taylor's The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism (2000), 20-91 and N. Riddell: 'Walter Citrine and the British Labour Movement 1925-1935', History journal, April 2000, 298-306 .

book,<sup>4</sup> the writer recalls his and Bevin's significant achievement in taking the trade unions (and the Labour Party) 'from Trafalgar Square to Downing Street'.

### Early lives

**Walter McLennan Citrine (1887- 1983)** was born in Wallasey, on Wirral, Merseyside, into a seafaring family. He left school aged twelve in 1899 for dusty and heavy work in a local flourmill. In 1901, his father, a ship's rigger and pilot on the River Mersey, got him an apprenticeship as an electrician. He qualified in 1906 working round the Mersey and south Lancashire. An autodidact from his early days, he acquired 'the dictionary habit' early on by studying and memorising the meaning of words.

He took night classes in economics and accounting, and taught himself shorthand - a skill that would stand him in good stead throughout his life. He also became deeply interested in 'electrical theory' (the cutting edge of technology then). This ability to reason in such abstract matters and to write lucidly, marked Citrine out as a new type of professional when he got involved in union affairs.<sup>5</sup> When Beatrice Webb visited him in 1927 she told him, 'you are the first intellectual who has held such a responsible position in the trade union movement'. Though he didn't take the 'intellectual ' tag as a compliment, having a poor opinion of many of those in and around the Labour movement at the time.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, it was his analytical and very rational mind which marked him out throughout his union life and it may well explain why Bevin and he were never close, though hugely complementary in their partnership at the head of the unions.

### Formative influences

Although his father was an active Merseyside Conservative Unionist, the young Walter was more influenced by his socialist workmates and he imbibed the classic Marxist texts, including *Value Price and Profit*, and *Capital* at an early age. These seem to have had some impact, though he was never a communist. It was the 'street socialism' of the time, especially Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* and *The Clarion* that got him involved in the left-wing Independent Labour Party from the early 1900s. He was soon giving talks to fellow union and ILP members in Wallasey, where he stood unsuccessfully for Labour in the 1918 general election.

However, Citrine's ambitions were soon channelled into more occupational pursuits. He joined the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) in 1911 and soon became a leading local official. Although that union had a distinctly craft bias, Citrine, with his strong socialist outlook, developed a much broader industrial philosophy. He was attracted to some of the ideas of the popular syndicalism (industrial unionism and 'direct action') of the time. By 1914, as chair of the District Committee, he had led the entire Merseyside membership in a

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<sup>4</sup> *Alternatives to State-Socialism in Britain – Other Worlds of Labour in the Twentieth Century* (edited by Peter Ackers & Alastair J. Reid), 2017, Palgrave.

<sup>5</sup> Although there is no biography of Citrine, he has left us a marvelous two volume memoir based on his contemporary short-hand notes - *Men and Work* (1964) and *Two Careers* (1967).

<sup>6</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 270.

nationwide ETU strike. He was elected as their first full-time district official soon after, and was exempted from war service. Although he doesn't say much about it, he was probably opposed to the war, like most of the ILP. Although not his and other industrial unions.

### **The ' A.B.C. of Chairmanship'**

His famous handbook grew from notes he produced as a guide to procedures at meetings for his Merseyside activists. In 1914 the ETU adopted it nationally in their rule-book. An expanded version for all other unions called 'The Labour Chairman' would later become the *ABC of Chairmanship*. Many generations of union activists and leaders owe a lot to that little Citrine 'bible', as Alan Johnson MP has recently confirmed.<sup>7</sup>

The ETU grew significantly during the First World War, (from 3,000 to almost 60,000 by 1920), through organizing the semi-skilled grades flooding into the war-time factories. Before the war the union had a tough time in being recognized for bargaining purposes. Citrine, who was re-elected District Secretary unopposed in 1917, was part of this advance, both as an organizer and negotiator with many of the electrical contracting employers around the Mersey. He also became Secretary and President of the Federation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trades (FEST), and so was a well-known figure in the wider trade union movement. He says that he learned a lot from negotiating with some of the large Merseyside employers, such as Cammel Laird and Port Sunlight, developing a less aggressive approach than the traditional 'platform style of delivery' then common. He found that developing 'continuing relationships' was the best means of extending the process of collective bargaining, 'based on good faith on both sides'.<sup>8</sup>

In 1920, he was elected Assistant General Secretary of the ETU, then based in Manchester, and held this post until 1923, both as a negotiator and administrator. One of his key achievements was to reform the notoriously inefficient, and occasionally corrupt, lay branch officer administration and financial system, by centralizing the collection and disbursement of contributions and expenses. The ETU President, at the time, Jack Ball, said that with his system of centralized finance, Citrine 'saved the union'. He was encouraged to apply for the vacant position of Assistant General Secretary of the TUC in 1923 and from hundreds of applicants he emerged successful, to start in 1924.

This solid union background outline is important to counter the sneer that Citrine was merely some backroom TUC bureaucrat. He was a 'civil servant' of the General Council, but because of his all-round 'brilliant' skills was given considerable responsibility for a wide range of policy as well as administrative matters. This was the secret of the authority he came to command.

**Ernest Bevin** (1881-1951), was born in a Somerset village, father unknown. His mother died when he was eight. His formal education was also elementary. Moving to Bristol, 'a

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Johnson: *Please Mr Postman*, (2014), 152-3, 245-6 and again in *The Long and Winding Road*, (2016), 193-4.

<sup>8</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 51.

stronghold of Non-Conformity', his formative development was along theological lines as a fervent Baptist preacher until his early twenties. He switched to politics from 1906, becoming active in the Bristol Socialist Society, an affiliate of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation. Nonetheless, Bevin's socialism was said to be more 'more than economic', carrying over 'much that Nonconformity had taught him into his socialism and trade unionism'.<sup>9</sup> These eclectic ideological influences were to mark an individualistic outlook. He was never hidebound by a party line and often struck out in imaginative directions. Interestingly, 'he did not like the ILP too well', which Citrine was drawn to about the same time.<sup>10</sup>

He was at first drawn to unemployment 'Right to Work' campaigns and municipal politics. He stood for Bristol Council in 1909, unsuccessfully, on a programme of 'common ownership of the means of life'. He had a variety of unskilled jobs - even opened his own Cafe - until he fixed on being a carter to join the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers Union Dockers' union in 1910, at the quite mature age of twenty-nine. He was immediately elected as chairman of the cabmen's branch, directing his already formidable organising skill to the casually employed carters and dockers, with great effect. In 1911 he became one of its full-time officials on £2 a week. And in 1914 became one of three National Organisers, stepping onto the national union and Labour scene, from his Bristol base.

By 1920, six years Citrine's senior, Bevin had become Assistant General Secretary of the Dockers Union and moved to London. He soon started to make a name for himself with his leadership of the Councils of Action movement which prevented the government exporting arms to Poland on the Jolly George to assist the anti-Soviet Union forces there.<sup>11</sup> Here was direct industrial action for political ends in classic syndicalist style. Yet Bevin was no syndicalist. More characteristic was his forensic presentation and advocacy of the dockers' wage claim to the Shaw Inquiry into dock labour that same year, which earned him massive publicity and the title Dockers KC.<sup>12</sup> At the same time he became the butt of communist-inspired attacks in his union over their failure to call out the dockers and road transport workers in support of the miners on Black Friday, 15th April 1921. As a result, the Triple Industrial Alliance and the syndicalist-led Transport Workers Federation, of which he was an Executive member, fell apart. No slouch about pursuing 'the industrial class war', Bevin had come to regard such poorly organized and uncoordinated attempts to drag his members into serious battles with Capital and the State, as poor generalship. He was already turning his attention to the more realizable task of building the 'One Big Union' which would more effectively deliver for his members. In 1922, the fourteen unions were merged to form the Transport & General Workers Union, with over 350,000 members. Its structure of regional and trade group autonomy under a strong central General Executive Council proved effective in holding together this massive and disparate

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<sup>9</sup> Bullock, Ernest Bevin, Trade Union Leader, 9 & 14.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 1-23.

<sup>11</sup> Bullock, Ernest Bevin, Trade Union Leader, 130-8.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, 116-130

formation. Citrine admired this 'original and flexible' creation<sup>13</sup> and Bevin easily emerged as the strongest candidate to lead it. His leadership style, though described as 'popular bossdom' by some, put him and his union on the wider map of the labour movement.<sup>14</sup> He would go on to grow this union throughout the 1920s to becoming the largest TUC affiliate, with aggressive recruiting drives and astute mergers.

So Citrine and Bevin were very different types. One sought to devote his skills to making the TUC 'the general staff' of an effectively coordinated union 'army', while the other sought to build a position of power by organizing a large new battalion in that TUC 'army'. Bevin didn't help to make the General Council a more powerful body so that it could lord it over the large regiments that he and others - Miners, Engineers, Rail and General & Municipal workers - led. Those tensions would come to the surface periodically between the two men, but they were never allowed to distract from their common purpose until the war years.

### **The Trades Union Congress**

Well before he became a TUC official, Citrine was pushing ideas for the reform of its Parliamentary Committee. The role of that committee had been primarily to lobby Parliament for legislative change, a function they were quite good at - Trade Disputes Act 1906, Trade Union Act 1913, political funding and reform of the amalgamation law - but it was coming under widespread pressure to take on an industrial coordinating role. In 1919, as an ETU delegate to the Glasgow TUC Conference, Citrine had intervened in the debate on the conduct of the prison officer and police strikes, critical of the Parliamentary Committee's failure to support them. In 1920, he put a proposal to the *Daily Herald* 'for endowing the TUC with greater powers' and wanted it to evolve into 'a general staff for labour'. It wasn't published, but he was later 'staggered' when 'proposals not very different from my own were featured in the Herald over the name of Ernest Bevin.'<sup>15</sup> Bevin was a leading member of the *Daily Herald* Board, but Citrine did not accuse him of plagiarizing his ideas.

They had met at the Glasgow Conference, when Bevin was complimentary about his speech. The interesting thing is that they were both thinking along the same lines. The difference was that it was Bevin who had the clout to bring about change. The Parliamentary Committee was replaced in 1921 by a General Council of thirty, elected annually by the affiliated unions in seventeen industrial groups, and from there until the General Strike in 1926 they were pressing for, and getting, more power from the jealously autonomous unions. The General Secretary's position was made full-time and MPs were barred from taking it on as a casual responsibility, as had been the case.

When he came to be interviewed for the Assistant General Secretary position in 1923, Citrine's pitch fitted well with the radical mood and ambition of the new left-led General

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<sup>13</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 71.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew Murray, *The T&G Story*, (2008), 44.

<sup>15</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 67.

Council of union leaders.<sup>16</sup> Bevin didn't actually take his union's place there until October 1925, which coincided with Citrine's promotion to Acting General Secretary on the death of Fred Bramley.

As a 'new boy' in London 'from the provinces' Citrine was immediately thrown into the world of tough union leaders; 'most of them had come up the hard way' and so 'carried their directness of speech and tenacity of purpose with them'. As Citrine put it: "Ernest Bevin was one of these. He was not at the time a member of the General Council, but, early on, Fred Bramley described him as Napoleon Bevin. The description was not far out, whether it related to his features or character. Bevin's approach to a subject was always constructive and yet, side by side with this, he was the finest drawer of 'red herrings' that I ever met. It was fascinating to listen to him in argument. When he felt he had a weak case he could divert a discussion so adroitly that no one could detect where the switch had taken place.... I regarded him from the first as one of the strongest, if not the strongest, personal forces in the trade union movement."<sup>17</sup>

However, they did not immediately get off 'on the right foot'. They clashed openly on the General Council in 1926 when Bevin attacked Citrine's Research Officer Walter Milne Bailey, for publishing an article in an American journal about the General Strike. The staff threatened to 'down tools' until he apologized. Some chance, from Bevin! However, Citrine came into the meeting and tore into Bevin, saying he wanted to be associated with the staff's protest. Bevin reacted characteristically by storming out claiming 'I always knew the secretary had his knife in for me'. Citrine was worried that that spat had lost him the T&GWU's support when he came to be elected as substantive General Secretary the following September at Congress. In fact, it did not. On reflection Bevin respected the courage and quality of the Council's new senior officer who was able and prepared to stand up to him.<sup>18</sup> This incident reveals a key feature of their productive relationship over the following two decades, though they would never become close 'mates'.

### **The ' Labour Movement'**

This was a vibrant but by no means coherent or fully integrated 'movement', but they had settled with a stronger TUC rather than the failed Triple Alliance of Black Friday. At its heart was a heavily unionised industrial working class, spearheaded by the miners (MFGB) with over a million members, the rail workers (NUR/ ASLEF) around 1 million, the road transport, dock, general and municipal workers (T&GWU and NUGMW) in the high hundreds of thousands; and hundreds of thousands of skilled engineering, electrical and shipbuilding workers (AEU, ETU and Boilermakers). Although predominantly male and 'blue-collar', there were also sizeable female and white-collar sections - textile workers, shop assistants, clerks and others. In all, about 6 million up to 1926 in over 200 unions affiliated to the TUC. With many other small unions not in the TUC.<sup>19</sup> The unions

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 74-5.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, 78. Praise indeed, written with fondness in 1964.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 235.

<sup>19</sup> H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism*, (1963), 260-3.

and socialist societies had also created an increasingly successful political Labour party from 1900 onwards to campaign for liberal laws which gave maximum freedom to organize and strike. As it developed, they secured the right to use a part of their considerable funds to bankroll the party for their political purposes and to support it in many other ways, using their organizational skills and the political drive of their activists at all levels. The Labour Party achieved astonishing electoral success in a relatively short time. It grew from just hundreds of thousands of votes in its breakthrough year of the 1906 general election with 29 MPs, to over four and a half million and 191 MPs in the 1923 election. Coinciding with Citrine's arrival in 1924, the Parliamentary leadership formed the first, albeit minority, Labour government.

Yet this Labour 'movement' was not at all clear, except in programmatic terms, where it was going. It had plenty of policies to change society but no detailed idea of what it wanted to do when it found itself in government, as became increasingly possible by the end of 1923. A divided Tory government fell and the Liberals were split, enabling a minority Labour Party to take office in February 1924.

The Parliamentary leadership, led by Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937) - a former ILP left-winger who had 'been there at the creation' - just wanted to establish their credentials to govern. Despite their fragile position, the left-led TUC and union leaders such as Bevin, expected 'their' party to deliver substantial gains for their members. If not the socialist dream immediately. Their differences and social distance were to prove irreconcilable, and MacDonald kept the TUC 'at arms length'.

Citrine, who had just joined the TUC in January 1924 as the new Assistant General Secretary (AGS), was invited to address the Parliamentary Labour Party at a House of Commons dinner in place of his boss, Fred Bramley, who was ill again. He struck a critical note by openly referring to the lack of close collaboration between the government and the TUC. He went on to say that the TUC, which had a different membership and function from the Labour Party, would 'occasionally express a different view'. This declaration of independence did not go down at all well with MacDonald or his PLP colleagues, but it reflected his General Council's attitude.<sup>20</sup> Up to then, the Parliamentary Committee had left politics to the Labour leadership, but a different mood was now prevalent at the TUC. The following year they would separate offices formally, as Bramley and Citrine set up their own Research, Publicity and International departments to develop and promote an independent line. Whilst this was borne out of left-wing dissatisfaction on the General Council with current Labour policy, Citrine would cement the distance now established as a principle for the future. That would have enormous future significance.

Immediately and more seriously, Bevin, as T&GWU General Secretary, riled MacDonald and his Ministers when he authorized two major strikes - the dockers nationwide and London tram workers - soon after the Labour Government had taken office. Bevin was not prepared to defer what he described as the 'economic war' or compromise his members' claims. This may have been on account of internal unofficial militant pressures on his T&GWU leadership, but it also reflected Bevin's philosophic outlook. He had no sympathy with those, like Mac Donald, who sought 'to broaden the Labour Party's role of political

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<sup>20</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 79.

agent of the trade unions into that of an independent national party'.<sup>21</sup> MacDonald invoked the Emergency Powers Act with the intention of bringing in troops to run the trams, a move which naturally outraged Bevin and the TUC. The dispute was settled on the union's terms, before it came to actual deployment of troops, but it hugely embarrassed the infant Labour government and started an enduring bitterness between Bevin and MacDonald, who accused him of disloyalty.<sup>22</sup>

Surprisingly, Citrine had little to say about that important episode of the first Labour Government and the unions, apart from his talk to the PLP, which may have reflected some unease about the unions' role in the downfall of the Labour government. The minority government fell after only eight months, triggered by the *Daily Mail's* publication of the fabricated 'Zinoviev Letter', which purported to incite disaffection amongst British soldiers. The return of a majority Tory government in the ensuing general election, also owed much to the unions' disaffection.

### **The General Strike**

While his initial brief was mainly administrative, the indisposition of his boss, Fred Bramley, meant Walter Citrine was increasingly called on to deputize in wider matters. He impressed the senior General Council members such as the left-wing President, Alf Purcell MP, whom he relied on for advice in Bramley's absence. An indication of his standing and outlook was a personal invitation to visit the Soviet Union by the powerful leader of the Russian unions, and Politburo member, Mikhail Tomsky (1880-1936). Tomsky was in London for critical Anglo-Soviet trade negotiations and was invited to address the TUC Congress at Hull in September 1924. It was from this visit that Citrine was suddenly recalled in October 1925 to become Acting General Secretary when Bramley died from a heart attack. He had hardly time 'to draw his breath' when the left-led TUC was thrust into the thick of the biggest and most dramatic industrial and political confrontation of the twentieth century.

Citrine was present throughout the meetings of the General Council and of the TUC negotiations with the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, on behalf of the miners and coal-owners, though only in an official capacity. The strike lasted nine days in glorious May weather involving over four million workers throughout the country. Although enthusiastic in pursuit of the action, Citrine was not impressed by the lack of preparation by the TUC leaders in charge. He had advised this in committee beforehand, but was ignored. In fact, they had never intended that it would come to a strike, expecting the government to pressurize the coal-owners into a compromise by the threat of such action - as they had done in 1925, 'Red Friday', with Bevin's T&G actively prepared to halt the movement of coal.<sup>23</sup> This was again a form of extra-parliamentary action by the Miners Federation, the T&G, NUR and TUC, signalling the trade unions' attempt to pressurize the government directly.

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<sup>21</sup> Bullock, Ernest Bevin – Trade Union Leader, 255.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 236-43;255-7.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 270-8.

But this time they gravely miscalculated. As the strongest union with a deeply empathetic cause and a messianic-type leader in Arthur (A.J.) Cook, the Miners Federation were able to push an excited London conference of all union Executives to demand, and an unresisting General Council to call, a general strike. It would start on Tuesday May 4th 1926. The government's initial stance was to continue discussions with the TUC for a negotiated settlement, but their mood hardened as the solid nature of the stoppages throughout the country dispelled any notion of a compromise settlement, with both the miners' leaders and the coal-owners 'digging in' for a long and most disruptive confrontation. An increasingly hawkish Tory Cabinet, with Churchill to the fore, began treating the strike as a constitutional challenge and prepared to use military force unless the TUC called it off. The General Council, including Bevin, felt that they had no alternative in those circumstances. It was left for Citrine and the TUC President to deliver their capitulation.

Despite Citrine's emphasis on the positives, there was no escaping the scale of the defeat and humiliation for the TUC and later the miners. It is an indication of Citrine's support for the strike that he was not blamed by the miners' leaders and he was elected General Secretary at the annual Congress in September 1926, with their support. Bevin's view of the strike was more bleak saying, 'we have committed suicide.'<sup>24</sup> We have dwelt on this titanic event at length as it was a watershed in the fortunes of the Labour movement and in the careers of Citrine and Bevin. Despite the undoubted fiasco of 'the Great Strike', it had been an amazing display of solidarity and protest by the British working class, which had sent a ripple down the spines of all other classes in Britain. When Citrine brought the news to the Cabinet that they were going to call it off, Baldwin expressed genuine relief - 'I thank God for your decision'. In his 1927 New Year message, George V appealed for reconciliation and this was endorsed by all the political leaders and many employers. But this didn't stop the Conservative Party and their angry employer supporters in the country, MPs and Ministers, seeking revenge. However, the Trade Disputes and Trade Union Act of 1927, which they passed, did not include much of their atavistic desires to roll back union rights beyond the landmark 1906 Trade Disputes Act - perhaps due to Baldwin's moderating influence. Nevertheless, the TUC acted as if the government had reverted to the Combination laws. It gave Citrine and the TUC a useful rallying point to restore morale from the depression induced by the defeat of the strike itself.

But the 'Great Strike' had changed the outlook of Walter Citrine, Ernest Bevin and of many more on the union and Labour side. All illusions about bringing down the 'Walls of Jericho' through syndicalist action, which had had a strong purchase on the minds of union activists like them since the turn of the century, were dispelled.<sup>25</sup> Things would never be the same again.

### **The Comintern assault**

Britain's trade union leaders were put on the defensive after the defeat of the General Strike, getting most of the blame for the TUC's alleged 'betrayal'. The Communist

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<sup>24</sup> Murray, *The T&G Story*, 52-3.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889* (1989), vol. II, 1911-1933, 455.

International (The Comintern, founded in 1919 by Lenin) was then a serious force globally, especially in the national trade unions, through the 'Red International of Labour Unions' (RILU). In Britain it operated through a CPGB front organization known as the National Minority Movement (or NMM). Excited by the prospect of revolution in Britain in the run up to the General Strike, the Comintern leaders sought to exploit discontent among the defeated miners and Left-led sections of other unions. They attacked the TUC frontally and union leaders generally. This was not measured criticism either. The union leaders, Bevin included, were reviled 'as traitors, renegades and capitalist lackeys'. The NMM's slogan was, 'Don't Trust Your Leaders' and that was the tenor of their dirty campaign.<sup>26</sup> Even those General Council union leaders on the Left, such as Alonzo Swales (AEU), Alf Purcell (Furniture Trades) and George Hicks (Construction), were disgusted and angry. But the communists met their match when the new TUC General Secretary and his Council fought back vigorously.

When he became President of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) in 1927, Citrine learned from the other countries' union leaders how such tactics had split and mortally weakened the Labour movement in Europe.<sup>27</sup> Bevin experienced it at first hand in his own T&GWU. Communist-led activists again exploited tensions between militant 'rank-and-file' groups, for example in the London bus section, and the union leadership, as they had done in 1921.<sup>28</sup>

Characteristically, Citrine did his homework and put together the evidence of 'a deliberately organised attempt ... made to capture the Trade Union Movement and to exploit it for a revolutionary subversive purpose'. He published this as a personal view - initially in a series of articles for the *Labour Magazine*, but they were soon taken up and issued by the General Council as an official TUC pamphlet.<sup>29</sup> It was a pretty compelling case and contributed to the marginalisation of communists in most of the British unions for a decade. Citrine thought that many individual communists, such as Harry Pollitt and Arthur Horner, were genuine in their beliefs, but by slavishly following the Comintern's line, he felt that they had greatly 'overplayed their hand'.<sup>30</sup> Confirmation of this Comintern design is now admitted even by scholars sympathetic to the British communists' side of things.<sup>31</sup> Between 1926 and 1937, about 150 British 'alumni' of the Lenin School in Moscow, became 'the most extreme of the intrusions by the Third International, the Comintern ... of a trained, responsive and carefully vetted cohort of revolutionary activists.'<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> R. Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions 1924-1933*, (Oxford, 1969), Preface, v and 188.

<sup>27</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 90-4.

<sup>28</sup> Bullock, Ernest Bevin – Trade Union Leader, 143-179; 521-4, 612-4.

<sup>29</sup> W. Citrine, *Democracy or Disruption – An Examination of Communist Influences in the Trade Unions*, (1928 –TUC Library HX 695).

<sup>30</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 253 and 257. Pollitt's Reply to Citrine was published by the N.M.M.

<sup>31</sup> Nina Fishman's *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions* (1995), though focused on the later 1933-45 period, in the introductory chapter stressed how Pollitt and Campbell sought to move the CPGB away from its earlier adventurism (pages 4-9).

<sup>32</sup> K. Morgan & G. Cohen, *Stalin's Sausage Machine – British Students at the International Lenin School 1926-1937*, (University of Manchester CPGB Biographical Project).

Citrine's anti-communism was therefore not primarily ideological, but a reaction to what he saw as an underhand campaign to undermine union leaders' position with their members, which he saw as both divisive and disruptive. A strong supporter of the Russian Revolution for nearly a decade after they had taken power, 'I had been enthused by Lenin's picture of an electric republic ...[which] would ensure to every citizen ... the advantages of a planned economy and the blessings of a modern civilisation'.<sup>33</sup> He had eagerly accepted Tomskey's invitation to visit the Soviet Union in 1925. He had been actively involved with IFTU President Purcell's efforts to establish a link between the Russian unions and the IFTU until 'a torrent of abuse' (in a 1,000 word telegram to the 1926 Congress and a RILU pamphlet), over the TUC conduct of the General Strike, ended those close relations. [*Men and Work*, 88-94]. He would go to the Soviet Union again in 1935, 1941, 1946 and 1956. He retained a keen interest, warm feeling but outspokenly critical attitude for what he saw as the first socialist experiment in a workers' state, whilst being in no doubt about the increasingly totalitarian nature of the Communist regime.

### **New Unionism**

The failure of the Comintern assault on the official union and Labour movement in Britain left the field clear for Citrine, Bevin and their General Council colleagues to strike out in a new direction.

Once installed as General Secretary, Citrine first set about modernizing TUC services and administration for the trade unions. They moved to Transport House, the T&GWU's fine new building, in 1928, where Bevin had all sections of the labour movement 'along the corridor'. Citrine changed the TUC's ramshackle administrative system, symbolized by his renowned card-index system. He made sure that the more mundane but vital work of advising and assisting the two hundred or so affiliated unions was seen as an important service by them. Preparing submissions and lobbying government departments on general legislative policy issues. To get the government to ratify the ILO Convention, for example, for a shorter, 40 hour, week, became a key TUC objective. He also led the strong campaign against the anti-union law of 1927, which became a much needed rallying point for the unions and Labour Party, culminating in the 1929 general election defeat of the Tories.

In all this he was fortunate in having the assistance of some very bright and committed senior staff, many of whom would later become TUC leaders. Citrine's style was very much to 'kick around' with them his ideas and to develop new thinking which would enable the General Council and Congress to recover. His Head of Research, Walter Milne-Bailey<sup>34</sup> was an original thinker. But the more academic socialist intellectuals of the day - the Webbs, the Coles, Laski and Stafford Cripps - did not contribute much to their efforts.<sup>35</sup> The TUC soon developed a reputation for excellence, as the quality of their Annual Reports to Congress testifies.

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<sup>33</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> D. Lyddon, 'Walter Milne-Bailey, the TUC Research Department and the 1926 General Strike', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 29/30 ,(2010), 123-51.

<sup>35</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 139, 173, 235, 246.

Citrine explained his radical vision and sense of direction: "The principal lesson I had learned was that the trade union movement must exert its influence in an ever-widening sphere and not be contained within the traditional walls of trade union policy ... We must try to expand the activities of the TUC until we could establish an efficient system whereby the TUC would be regularly and naturally consulted by whatever government was in power on any subject of direct concern to the unions."<sup>36</sup>

This was a complete change in outlook from that which had led to the creation of the General Council just five years before. Though many of the same people were still on that body, they had adopted Citrine's new approach and persuaded their own unions and delegates to Congress. From a body whose rhetoric suggested that only the overthrow of capitalism would do, without losing their critical edge, they would now address the realities of this economy and seek influence in all spheres of the society. This would have profound implications for the entire world of labour from there onwards.

### **The Citrine-Bevin partnership**

The other key figure helping to bring about this transformation was Ernest Bevin and it is generally accepted that the partnership with Citrine from 1926 onwards was critical. However, it is wrong to see it as the work of two great men, but rather that of a formidable generation of union and TUC leaders generally. The likes of Arthur Hayday of the NUGMW (Municipal & General workers), Alf Purcell of the Furniture trades, Arthur Pugh of the Steelworkers, 'Jimmie' Thomas of the NUR, John Hill of the Boilermakers and George Hicks of the construction workers (AUBTW).<sup>37</sup>

With the defeat of the General Strike, they had all learned that, as Lord Bullock put it, 'there were limits not only to their power but also to the use they could afford to make of it unless they were prepared to risk being carried much further than most of them meant to go.'<sup>38</sup> Bevin had also learned that 'the Labour Party is no longer a purely Trade Union party'.

### **Political influences**

It is likely that Citrine moved away from his earlier left-wing ILP socialism soon after the General Strike, as the ILP leadership moved closer to the CPGB/Minority Movement in their criticisms of TUC policy initiatives. By 1930 he openly criticized the fifteen or so ILP MPs for opposing the TUC/LP-supported Anomalies (unemployment insurance) Bill.<sup>39</sup> They were on the verge of being thrown out of the Labour Party.

Nor was he over-impressed by the influential intellectuals around the Socialist League in the 1930s. He felt that 'with rare exceptions', namely Laski and Cole, 'most of them never

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions*, has short sketches of all other General Council members. 572-81.

<sup>38</sup> Bullock, *Ernest Bevin - Trade Union Leader*, 346.

<sup>39</sup> R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929-31* (1967), 324-5.

really understood the trade union movement' and were more concerned with 'discussing ultimate Socialist objectives of a theoretical character', when the real threat was fascism.<sup>40</sup> He says that 'Bevin had little time for them' either, 'I know from his conversations with me that he resented their intrusion into trade union affairs'.<sup>41</sup> With his increasingly busy national and international schedule, Citrine preferred to rely on his own powerhouse of union and industrial ideas at Eccleston Square, where woolly theorising was not entertained.

They could also call upon some of the best economic thinkers of the period, such as John Maynard Keynes, (1883-1946), who they regarded as 'Britain's foremost economist'. They would confer frequently on the National Economic Council and both Keynes and Bevin briefed Citrine from the MacMillan Committee on the credit and financial system, from 1929 onwards.<sup>42</sup>

### **'The Next Step' for the unions**

In late November 1927, Citrine launched 'The Next Step in Industrial Relations' in a *Manchester Guardian* article. Now, "the unions should actively participate in a concerted effort to raise industry to its highest efficiency by developing the most scientific methods of production, eliminating waste and harmful restrictions, removing causes of friction and avoidable conflict, and promoting the largest possible output so as to provide a rising standard of life and continuously improving conditions of employment."<sup>43</sup>

It was a risky step. By appearing to abandon their traditional rhetoric of ideological opposition to capitalist-directed production, this 'New Unionism' incurred strong opposition from those steeped in Marxist or militant syndicalist psychology, such as A.J. Cook and Jimmy Maxton MP of the ILP. However, the vast majority of the General Council were prepared to try it as it offered the prospect of a recovery of union recognition for collective bargaining and serious engagement by managers with the many grievances of workers.

There was no response from the employer organisations, but the major industrialist Alfred Mond of ICI, brought a group of forty large industrialists to meet the TUC and to discuss their broader agenda. They wanted union support for major rationalisation and modernisation plans to meet growing German, U.S. and Japanese competition. Citrine and Bevin convinced their colleagues that this would also protect British jobs, enable higher pay and strengthen union organization. As the joint Mond-Turner discussions embraced many other long-sought union aims, the vast majority of the General Council agreed to the talks from January 1928.

These went surprisingly well, though the official employer organisations vetoed their more radical proposal for a permanent National Industrial Council (an Industrial

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<sup>40</sup> Citrine has an entire chapter about their dealings with the Socialist League in the 1930s, *Men and Work*, 293-309, especially at 300-301.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 301.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 136-8, 240.

<sup>43</sup> *Manchester Guardian (MG) Supplement*, 30.9.1927; Clegg, *History*, vol II, 463-4.

Parliament in embryo). The NIC would have had equal union and employer representation and joint Conciliation Boards to act in disputes'.<sup>44</sup> For Citrine, and Bevin, another attraction was that it enabled them to counter 'the resurgence of the hostility towards trade unionism' after the General Strike. Even the employer organisations now felt obliged to confer with the TUC on 'matters of common interest' and many more employers were willing to recognize unions.

### **The 1931 Labour movement crisis**

The Great Depression from 1929 until the mid 1930s, put all such hopes on hold. The major unions had resumed their normal 'contentious alliance' with the Labour Party from 1927 and helped elect a larger, but still minority, Labour government in 1929.<sup>45</sup> Although not affiliated, the TUC were closely involved through a National Joint Council of which Citrine was secretary.

To begin with, relations with the TUC were much better than in 1924. Even Bevin invited MacDonald to address the TG&WU conference in 1928. They got a Bill to repeal the 1927 Act in the 1930/1 King's Speech, and MacDonald invited Bevin and Citrine to sit on the Economic Advisory Council (EAC) with key ministers and sympathetic academics. John Maynard Keynes, the eminent economist and informal economics adviser to Citrine and Bevin, chaired it. MacDonald also offered them both Peerages, which they refused, though not without hesitation on Bevin's part.<sup>46</sup> Even so, there was little of the close liaison and interchange of views which the unions expected from 'their' government. MacDonald and especially his Chancellor, Phillip Snowden (1864-1937), were unduly distant and the EAC came to be a 'talking-shop'.<sup>47</sup> The trade union repeal Bill was abandoned due to Conservative-Liberal opposition, without serious discussion with the TUC about how parts of it might have been salvaged. This did not go down well.

The TUC were also deeply suspicious of MacDonald's appointment of the May Royal Commission in January 1931, to 'examine the workings of the unemployment insurance scheme', seeing it as an all-party plot to cut benefits.<sup>48</sup> Their worst fears were realized as the financial crisis deepened, increasing City and global financier's pressure for heavy cuts in government expenditure. Snowden and MacDonald were seen to be in thrall to these orthodox Treasury and Bank of England approaches which left Bevin and Citrine deeply unconvinced. Bevin's schooling in economics since 1929 from Keynes and the various financial committees he sat on, gave him the confidence to challenge Snowden. When Bevin and Citrine met the Cabinet sub-committee, Snowden's brusque dismissal of their

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<sup>44</sup> K.Middlemas, *Politics in Industrial Society*, (1979), 208-9.

<sup>45</sup> 287 Labour MPs, 261 Conservatives and 59 Liberals.

<sup>46</sup> *Men and Work*, 31--2.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, 'Snowden whom I found to be unexpectedly pompous, rigid, devoid of imagination, and frigidly orthodox'. 281.

<sup>48</sup> See Robert Skidelsky's detailed record of the bitter exchanges between Citrine and MacDonald and his Minister of Labour, Margaret Bondfield, in *Politicians and the Slump*, 262-70. Bondfield, (1873-1953), a former General Council member, is thought to have messed things up.

alternative 'equality of sacrifice' approach caused offence and they broke off the discussions, with the TUC, going away to lobby MPs and Cabinet members. Bevin, the key TUC Board member of the influential *Daily Herald* seems to have made the running, with Citrine as General Council spokesperson. Robert Skidelsky (biographer of Keynes and author of the in depth study of the 1931 crisis), concluded that Bevin was 'the dominant personality in the trade union movement, with an intelligence and breadth of vision far beyond those of his colleagues, with the possible exception of the general secretary, Walter Citrine, with whom he worked closely.'<sup>49</sup> Though more cautious in his approach, when it came down to it, Citrine backed Bevin and articulated the General Council's stance.

MacDonald, who had little grasp of economics, went along with Snowden, to prevent him deepening the crisis by resigning.<sup>50</sup> Being unable to get a consensus in the Cabinet, though he had a 12 to 9 majority, they felt they must resign as a government. The shock came when it was revealed that MacDonald had been prevailed on by the Opposition leaders and the importunities of the King, George V, to form in its place a 'National' government to carry through the cuts.

The reaction from the Labour movement could not have been imagined.<sup>51</sup> Although Citrine described himself as 'one of the Prime Minister's severest critics'<sup>52</sup>, it was Bevin who really articulated the feelings of most in the Labour movement, leading the chorus of 'treachery' and 'betrayal'.<sup>53</sup> This bitterness deepened as MacDonald led his 'National' government into a general election in which the divided Labour Party was slaughtered, holding only 46 from the 287 MP's seats it had returned with in 1929. Whereas the Conservatives got 471 seats.<sup>54</sup> It was a catastrophe whatever the rights and wrongs of how it was handled.

In his many subsequent references to it, Citrine gives the impression that he deeply regretted that they had not been able to reach a compromise with MacDonald and Snowden, whom he still blamed for their behavior in handling the crisis. As Prime Minister and TUC General Secretary, they continued to have dealings but MacDonald cut an increasingly sad figure, from the powerful orator and leader who had helped create the Labour Party. Citrine was one of the few in the Labour movement who had 'a good word to say' for MacDonald after 1931 and their relations remained civil.<sup>55</sup>

An important fall-out from the disastrous political rout of 1931 for Labour was that it completely changed the dynamic within the Labour movement. It was the TUC under Citrine and Bevin who now began to dominate Labour Party policy-making through a

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<sup>49</sup> Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump*, 369.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 366.

<sup>51</sup> Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald*, 1997, 620-23 and 646-7. Marquand's account captures the tense and bitter atmosphere of their exchanges.

<sup>52</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 287.

<sup>53</sup> Bullock devotes an entire chapter to 'The 1931 Crisis' justifying Bevin and the General Council's part. Ernest Bevin – Trade Union Leader, 476-503.

<sup>54</sup> See also Robert Taylor's account, TUC, 52-9.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, 291.

revitalized National Joint Council, of which Citrine was joint secretary. Their far closer liaison and relations with a new generation of Labour leaders - George Lansbury, Clement Attlee, Hugh Dalton, Herbert Morrison - would lead to electoral recovery by 1935. More significantly, it would issue in a far more radical programme which reflected industrial as well as social objectives.

### **The international dimension**

More than most senior figures in British public life, Citrine's outlook was shaped by what was happening in the wider world at the time. As President of the International Federation of Trade Unions, whose offices were in Berlin, he was a regular visitor for Executive meetings between 1931 and 1933 and so experienced at first hand the rise of the Nazis. After Hitler inveigled his way to power in March 1933, the destruction of the huge German union movement and socialist parties quickly followed.<sup>56</sup> The IFTU President saw clearly what this would mean for the trade unions and socialists in the rest of Europe as Hitler's Fascists extended their reach there, over the following years. The British TUC was then the premier trade union centre in the world, with a major international influence as international issues came to dominate the political agenda at home. Citrine emerged as an authoritative voice seeking to alert the Labour movement and British politicians and society about the real nature and threat posed by German Nazism.<sup>57</sup>

In his report to the TUC Congress of 1933 on 'the situation in Germany', he analyzed the factors which had produced the Nazi dictatorship. He pointed up the activities of the Comintern-controlled German Communist Party as primary contributors to the divisions which had paralysed the German labour movement in the face of the Nazi threat.<sup>58</sup> He also criticized the Social Democratic Party leaders and its union allies for not resisting or allowing the IFTU to help. Naturally, his bracketing of the Soviet 'dictatorship of the proletariat' with the Nazi dictatorship, caused considerable surprise and some opposition at that Congress. Aneurin Bevan, who was there as a Miners' Federation delegate, intervened to object to Citrine's 'most dangerous speech', but not even his own delegation supported him.<sup>59</sup> Citrine got across to the Congress that the very survival of unions and fundamental democratic rights were under serious threat throughout Europe, and so this appeal to democracy versus dictatorship was plausible and his report was overwhelmingly adopted, with strong support from Bevan's T&GWU.<sup>60</sup>

From 1936 onwards, the IFTU and TUC pressed the British government strongly to supply arms to the Spanish government, but 'we utterly failed to move them' (Citrine was very close to Largo Caballero, the Spanish Republic's Prime Minister and a member of the IFTU

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<sup>56</sup> Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, (2006), 456-7, 465.

<sup>57</sup> *Men and Work*, 344-5 and 425.

<sup>58</sup> A sympathetic biography, *Stalin*, (1952), by an Austrian friend of the Soviet Union in the 1930s, Nikolaus Basseches, 323-4, confirms Citrine's view.

<sup>59</sup> John Campbell, *Nye Bevan – A Biography*, (1987), 58.

<sup>60</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 287, 347, 399, 549-50, 564 and 590. The full report to the Congress is in the TUC Annual Report, 1933. TUC Archive, HD6661.

Executive). This included meetings with Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden and public demonstrations and propaganda.<sup>61</sup> Citrine also shared platforms with other anti-fascists of all parties, especially Winston Churchill, his old adversary in the General Strike. Little wonder that Sir Walter Citrine's name was on the Gestapo's list of 2,300 key British figures for immediate arrest in the event of a successful invasion of the island in 1940.<sup>62</sup>

## **Rearmament for World War 2**

Citrine's contribution to changing Labour Opposition policy on rearmament has been overlooked on account of Bevin's more famous verbal assault on the pacifist Labour leader, George Lansbury MP (1859-1940), at their Brighton Conference in October 1935. In fact, it was Citrine as TUC General Secretary with Bevin's strong support, who instigated the original TUC motion which started this process.<sup>63</sup> As Labour leader, Lansbury had agreed not to speak against the new NEC line to change their policy in favour of League of Nations sanctions.<sup>64</sup> It was a foregone conclusion that the conference would support this change anyway, as Mussolini had invaded Abyssinia while the conference was on and they did so by 2,168,000 votes to 102,000. When Lansbury deviated from his promise, Bevin reacted savagely with his famous put-down, telling Lansbury what to do with his pacifist conscience, which he had been trailing around.<sup>65</sup> Bevin went further in his post-debate remarks, saying that he had 'set fire to the faggots' for Lansbury's martyrdom, remarks he afterwards regretted.<sup>66</sup> Citrine, like many other leading figures at the time, regarded Bevin's 'brutal assault' on Lansbury as unnecessarily 'cruel' on the old Labour hero. This was 'the rough side of Bevin, the dockers' leader of the earlier years', as Lord Bullock put it.<sup>67</sup>

The differences between Citrine and Bevin were not just a question of their different styles - 'Citrine's precise, lawyer-like mastery of the facts to present a case and Bevin's larger, sweeping strokes to sketch a policy'.<sup>68</sup> Citrine, as TUC General Secretary was privy to international union, social democratic leaders and British government intelligence on their 'dangerously run down' armed forces, and so was in the best position to brief the General Council and give the lead on policy.<sup>69</sup> But Bevin alone had the floor at Labour Conferences. In 1934, it was Citrine who delivered the international trade unions' (IFTU) Vienna

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 357-9.

<sup>62</sup> *Guardian Century, 1940-49, Nazi Death blacklist booklet discovered in Berlin in 1945. Compiled by the Gestapo after France fell, for the invasion of Britain.*

<sup>63</sup> Bullock, Ernest Bevin – Trade Union Leader, 561-4.

<sup>64</sup> He had indicated as much to Citrine in a private meeting at Brighton before the Conference debate. Citrine, *Men and Work*, 350-1.

<sup>65</sup> Francis Williams, Ernest Bevin, *Portrait of a Great Englishman*, (1952), 190-96.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, 570-1.

<sup>67</sup> Bullock, vol 1 Ernest Bevin –Trade Union Leader, 570.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 564.

<sup>69</sup> Citrine, *Men and Work*, 353.

conference appeal to the TUC Conference, which raised £10,000 for the Austrian trade unions to buy guns to defend themselves from the fascists.<sup>70</sup> In 1935, they both instigated the General Council's ultimatum to the Labour Party National Executive Council that they must abandon their opposition to rearmament. Up to that point, it is arguable that it was Citrine's authority as General Secretary of the TUC which carried most weight.

## World War Two

After the war came to Britain in 1940, Bevin became the more important public figure as Minister of Labour and National Service. Citrine wanted it that way and it was on his advice that Bevin was taken into the War Cabinet. But Chamberlain and Greenwood wanted to dump him for breaching government policy by bumping up the rail and agricultural workers' pay, 'off his own bat'.<sup>71</sup> What is less known is that Citrine was also offered a Ministerial post by Churchill when the coalition was first being formed. However, he decided that he could be far more effective at the TUC.<sup>72</sup> Instead, he was made a Privy Counsellor so that he would have direct access to all Ministers, not just the Ministry of Labour, and especially to the Prime Minister, on behalf of the unions. This gave Citrine immense influence throughout the war years. Consistent with his long-stated policy, he did not wish for TUC influence to be confined to narrow labour issues.

Together Citrine and Bevin helped mobilise the unions for the war effort through the Ministry of Labour and the TUC/production unions. They addressed the General Council at Bournemouth on 12th May 1940, just as the army was being lifted from the Dunkirk beaches against the background of the threat of imminent Nazi invasion. In this dangerous situation they got the unions to accept draconian emergency legislation, written mainly by Bevin, replacing strikes by compulsory arbitration, introducing labour direction and many other unprecedented relaxations of traditional union restrictive practices. In return, the unions were made central players in the war production effort. This was through consultative structures at every level on various joint committees. It resulted in workers getting improved conditions like canteens, holidays and status. They also came to find the arbitration boards suited the skills of their officials, so much so that they did not complain after the war when they were retained until 1951.

Citrine had frequent 'one to one' meetings with Churchill, and a personal rapport that was envied by some Ministers, including Bevin. He recalled his visits during the 'Blitz' and later representations about issues such as factory and public raid warnings and the impact of the flying bombs ('doodlebugs') on London, in terms of the workers' morale. He and Churchill often kept each other's spirits up during the darkest London Blitz nights reciting patriotic poetry, remembered vividly from their childhoods.<sup>73</sup> Citrine's importance owed much to what Churchill saw as his international standing as IFTU President. It was Citrine

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<sup>70</sup> Williams, Ernest Bevin, 190.

<sup>71</sup> Citrine, *Two Careers*, 50-2.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Taylor, *The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism* (2000), 76-91. Chapter 2, Ernest Bevin, Walter Citrine and the TUC's War, 1939-1945.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, 198-9.

who went to the United States in 1941 to persuade the American unions to back Roosevelt against the strong isolationist mood among the workers there. Churchill sent a personal note to Roosevelt urging him to meet Citrine, which he did. It was Citrine who argued for aid to the Soviet Union after the invasion by Hitler in June 1941 and who visited with a TUC delegation to reinforce the new British-Soviet alliance with the Russian unions.

Unfortunately, this very high national standing of Citrine with the Prime Minister seems to have been resented by Bevin. There are adverse references in his papers which suggest that he began to view Citrine as a rival, once remarking that 'he wants to be Foreign Secretary'. He was also critical of Citrine's absences abroad from his TUC job - his deputy Vincent Tewson regularly stood in for him - but that was hardly fair. In fact, this bad feeling between them seems to have crystallised around one incident in 1941, which almost caused a rupture between the two. Bevin had promised that the autocratic powers he had been given as Minister of Labour would be exercised in close consultation with the unions. In practice, things didn't always work so smoothly, as his officials' or at least Bevin's idea of 'consultation' was not what the unions, or even employers, were always happy with. Bevin's 'Napoleonic' tendencies came to the fore in his considerable efforts to direct manpower policy across all departments, often 'riding roughshod' over fellow Ministers, trade union officials and employers.<sup>74</sup>

As TUC General Secretary, it was often Citrine's lot to raise awkward decisions on behalf of union colleagues and employers, in 'one to one' meetings with the Minister. He was one of the few who could stand up to 'Ernie'.<sup>75</sup> However, their relationship deteriorated from 1941 onwards, when Bevin publicly denounced the TUC-owned *Daily Herald* editor, and, by implication, Citrine as a key Director. Bevin claimed the paper was 'carrying on a Quisling policy' because of their 'opposition to his commandeering of skilled labour'.<sup>76</sup> It became so heated that the *Evening Standard* described it as 'open, if undeclared war'. Attlee, as Deputy Prime Minister, was asked by Churchill to intervene, and wrote to both officially in these terms: 'I have for some time been distressed to observe what appears to me to be a growing friction between you and Bevin'. He told them both to cool it. They exchanged conciliatory, but by no means warm, letters.<sup>77</sup> Citrine was deeply upset by this attack - to be called a Quisling i.e., traitor, was the worst thing anybody could be accused of at that time (Bevin claimed he had been misreported). He later referred to 'a certain side of Ernest's character',<sup>78</sup> but allowed for his former union colleagues' sensitivities better than most, because of his recognition of Bevin's enormous qualities and vital role.

However, their relationship, never close personally, did not improve. Nonetheless, by 1942, Citrine could justifiably say: "The influence of the trade unions has been enormously strengthened during the war and at no period in British history has the contribution which the organised workers have made to the success of their country been more widely or

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<sup>74</sup> Citrine, *Two Careers*, 125-8, 132, 137-8.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 45-55. The chapter is entitled, *This Man Bevin!*

<sup>76</sup> *Daily Herald*, 29th September 1941. Citrine Papers BLPES, 10/3.

<sup>77</sup> Citrine Papers, BLPES, 10/3.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, 10/2. Letter to Beaverbrook 12th November 1952.

readily recognised."<sup>79</sup>

That owed much to the efforts of these two great union leaders and, of course, to the entire trade union movement-led working class. After the war, Bevin became Foreign Secretary and so their paths rarely crossed. However, they seem to have met occasionally at events in a more relaxed atmosphere. Sadly, Bevin had to resign as Foreign Secretary due to ill health in 1951 and died soon afterwards. Citrine was one of the first to convey his sincere condolences to Bevin's wife.

In 1946, Citrine decided to step down from his arduous, but not well-paid job. He was offered a safety and training role as a member of the new National Coal Board and he was active in this role until in 1947 Attlee offered him, now Baron Citrine of Wembley, a dream post, as a former electrician, to be Chair of the new British Electricity Authority. This was a role he performed with relish for another decade, and part-time until 1960. He retired finally in 1960 to his home in Wembley Park, and started to attend the Lords more frequently and take part in some debates, where his contributions were always keenly listened to. His wife Doris died in 1973 and he moved to Devon where he died in 1983, aged ninety five.

## Conclusion

How are we to view this labour partnership today? The events and years, national and international, during which they preeminently strode the union and Labour stage, make their careers of immense interest. Though Bevin is the best remembered, Citrine must surely be seen as of comparable standing. However, because of the serious fall-out during the war, and lacking the personal *rapprochement* to repair fences, their partnership seems to have faded. Bevin became Attlee's staunch ally, whereas Citrine was more friendly with another of Bevin's *bêtes noires*, Herbert Morrison, who unsuccessfully challenged Attlee in 1945. This falling apart would have grave consequences for the trade unions and Labour, as they would lose both of them: one to high office, the other to the Central Electricity Authority.

This study recalls the heyday of the organised British Labour movement. Citrine's contribution sheds new light on the key turning points of that century, and not just its industrial history. Two points immediately occur. First, Citrine as the architect of the new TUC made it an independent force in British society, which it held long after Citrine had departed. Not for nothing was it regarded as another 'estate of the realm'. Secondly, after the catastrophic defeat of 1931, Citrine and Bevin helped the Labour Party to become a far more substantial social democratic party with a progressive alternative programme for government after 1945. Since then, with the left/right divisions of the unions impacting upon it, Labour leaderships in government have been a pale shadow of that 1945-51 administration. Finally, Citrine's role as an international union figure and statesman, his anti-fascist and anti-appeasement/pro-rearmament contribution, was a crucial ingredient of that Labour substance, which ironically, Tories like Baldwin and Churchill recognized far more than Attlee. Ernest Bevin appreciated it fully before the war, but unfortunately the immense pressures and strains of that global conflict drove them apart. Walter Citrine must rank as one of the British trade unions' finest products, which the unions today and

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<sup>79</sup> Citrine, *Two Careers*.

wider society should recognise more fully. A better appreciation of his contributions, might also stir a more favourable reconsideration of the role of trade unions in society today.

Ernest Bevin's reputation as a union and Labour leader, has endured. From a union perspective, his finest achievement was undoubtedly the creation of the mighty Transport & General Workers Union (now UNITE). In the T&G, he bequeathed a powerful organisation to his successors and generations of ordinary workers. Through it, in partnership with Walter Citrine, he also played a leading role in the TUC and Labour Party from the General Strike to the Second World War, culminating in his vital role as Minister of Labour during that conflict. He used that influence to strengthen the role of trade unions and to improve the conditions and status of ordinary workers. As Foreign Secretary 1945-51, he was part of the most radically reforming post-war Labour Government that Britain has had, though it was also the era of the Cold War. His achievement of that high position is testimony to the qualities both personal and of that union movement which took him from that of a carter to the pinnacle of political life in the British Empire.