Practical anti-fascism? The 'Aid Spain' Campaigns in North East England, 1936-1939.

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Introduction

'When the fighting broke out on 18 July [1936] it is probable that every anti-Fascist in Europe felt a thrill of hope. For here, at last, apparently, was democracy standing up to Fascism. For years past the so-called democratic countries had been surrendering to Fascism at every step. […] It seemed - possibly it was - the turning of the tide'.[1] So wrote George Orwell about the Spanish military revolt, backed by two of Europe's fascist powers, Italy and Germany, against the Spanish popular front government.[2] However, the national leadership of the 'official' (i.e. non-communist) British labour movement advocated support for the right wing 'National' government's policy of non-intervention in Spain. By denying the Republic's right under international law to buy arms for self-defence, this agreement effectively aided the rebels. Though the labour movement eventually reversed its policy, the national leadership took little positive action in support of the Republic.

[1] George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* in George Orwell, *Orwell in Spain*, London, 2001, p.170.

[2] Though Franco himself was no fascist (and neither was a considerable section of the right-wing coalition he forged), it is still legitimate to talk of anti-fascism in relation to this conflict given the support that Franco received from Hitler and Mussolini.

Those angered at this inactivity organised in numerous 'Aid Spain' campaigns, ostensibly to aid the Republic, which emerged to fill the void. Though often inspired by the formation of an organisation at national level, these campaigns owed their significance to the widespread and energetic work of grass roots activists. The response was impressive. Jim Fyrth claimed that what he deemed the 'Aid Spain movement' was 'the most widespread and representative mass movement in Britain since the mid-nineteenth century days of Chartism and the Anti-Corn Law Leagues, and the most outstanding example of international solidarity in British history'.[3] However, there is surprisingly little published on this important topic and what there is tends to view these campaigns in an uncritical manner.[4]

This chapter aims to partly redress this by examining the most important 'Aid Spain' campaigns that emerged in the north east of England, a region characterised by a strong (especially in County Durham), traditionally moderate and loyal labour movement.[5] Despite this loyalty, militant anti-fascism was strong in the region, or, more accurately, on Tyneside. The British Union of Fascists (BUF), which made early progress in the north east, was met with strong opposition, both spontaneous and organised by the left, which culminated with the formation of the 'Anti-Fascist League' in summer 1934. The peak of anti-fascist resistance was reached during two days of violence in May 1934. After this time, BUF activities were severely limited and an

[3] Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain. The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39*, London, 1986, p.21.

[4] See Hywel Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, London, 1984 and Mike Squires, *The Aid to Spain Movement in Battersea, 1936-1939*, London, 1994.

[5] For the purposes of this chapter 'north east England' is what is now Northumberland, Tyneside and County Durham, but not Teesside. Though there appears to be no internal records left by any of the part of any 'Aid Spain' campaign in the region, there is a good deal of information on some of these campaigns in the regional press and other sources like trade union minutes. For a comprehensive list of all the material examined for this research, see Lewis H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939', unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Newcastle University, 2002, pp.291-311.

attempted fascist revival in 1935 proved abortive. Effectively, as Nigel Todd has shown, the BUF threat was eliminated in the region by 1935.[6] There was clearly a strong base of anti-fascist sentiment in the region that could have been capitalised on in order to mount solidarity action for the Spanish Republic. However, it is clear that 'Aid Spain' campaigns were not simply an unequivocal manifestation of practical anti-fascist politics, as many included strong elements of humanitarianism. This chapter aims to isolate the humanitarian strands from the anti-fascism in these campaigns, and then to assess their effects and implications. Of course, there is some blurring between the two concepts, the definitions of which could be eternally debated. However, this overlap has been overemphasised by those wishing to depict all of these campaigns as integral elements of a successful anti-fascist mass movement.

The Spanish Medical Aid Committees

As the first group of campaigns to emerge, it is logical to begin by examining the Spanish Medical Aid Committees.[7] The national committee was established by socialist and communist doctors in August 1936 and at least seventeen similarly named committees emerged in the north east in the ensuing months, mostly based in the larger towns and cities, with a handful of others scattered around the pit villages of County Durham. The first committee in the area was at Newcastle, formed in September 1936. North Shields and Gateshead committees were in existence by the end of 1936 and, in the first six months of 1937, between one and three new committees a month appeared. The last, Morpeth, was formed in September 1937. There was a great deal of diversity amongst the committees in terms of their political complexion. At least six, like that at Gateshead, seem to have been run exclusively by activists from the

[6] Nigel Todd, *In Excited Times. The People Against the Blackshirts*, Whitley Bay, 1995, pp.13, 23, 26, 28-33, 65, 74.

[7] The International Brigade Dependant's Aid, British Youth Foodship and Voluntary Industrial Aid campaigns are not discussed as they did not involve significant numbers of people and left little evidence of their activities in the region.

'official' labour movement. Three others, including Blaydon committee, had both 'official' labour movement activists and Communists working together on them. A further four incorporated individuals from across the political spectrum.[8]

The key difference, though, was the way in which they framed their campaigning message. Ostensibly the issue was clear. The message, surely, had to be 'fight fascism in Spain by supporting the Republic', an unequivocal anti-fascist stance. Some committees did campaign on these terms. Blaydon committee, for example, was explicit in the need to support the 'struggle of Spanish democracy against Fascist intervention'.[9] However, it is striking that some of the other committees did not depict their campaign in this explicit anti-fascist manner. Instead, they chose to emphasise the suffering of innocent women and children in the conflict. Thus, for example, a Newcastle committee appeal in late October 1936 called for medical supplies and clothes for 'the sufferers among the civilian population'.[10] This emphasis on humanitarianism implied that the plight of civilians was somehow separate from the political situation, and that to side with people who were merely the innocent victims of war was not to take a political stance and side with either the Republic or the rebels.

The *Linaria* Strike and the Defence Committee

[8] Mates, 'United Front', pp.41-3, 129-133, 274.

[9] *Blaydon Courier*, 16 January 1937.

The view that the Spanish struggle was essentially about 'democracy versus fascism' was, partly as a consequence of the popular front policy, the dominant paradigm on the left. However, it was not the only view of the conflict on the left, and some, such as George Orwell, emphasised the revolution that had occurred in many parts of Republican Spain. This had significant implications for the kind of solidarity action that could be contemplated, for the level of working class response and for its effectiveness.

Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* in *Orwell in Spain*, p.188.

[10] *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 27 Oct. 1936.

A second campaign emerged after 23 February 1937, when the north eastern crew of the SS *Linaria* held a sit-in strike in protest at being ordered to transport a cargo of nitrates from Boston (Massachusetts) to the Franco-held port of Sevilla. The leader of the strike was Alex Robson, an active Communist who was clearly acting on anti-fascist motives.[11] Given the rarity of strike action for overtly political motives, especially in Britain in the nineteen thirties, the event was highly significant and potentially full of anti-fascist propaganda possibilities. Although the crew's submission to the captain protested at 'being made a party by the fascists to their suppression of the people of Spain', a Robson quote that simultaneously got equal press coverage made no explicit mention of fascism.[12] Instead, the crew did 'not want to help to deliver nitrate because we do not want to be a party to the killing of women and children by bombs and shells'.[13] In this quote, it sounded as though the crew were acting from anti-war motives (because wars killed the innocent), and that equally it would have gone on strike if the nitrate had been bound for the Republic. As a consequence, the anti-fascist message of the crew's action was somewhat blunted.

Established to support the deported crew, the *Linaria* Defence Committee, like some of the Spanish Medical Aid committees, also included individuals from the right of the labour movement, as well as Communists and Labour Party members.[14] And, like the broad-based Spanish Medical Aid committees, here, too, the campaign to help the men was not as explicitly anti-fascist as it could have been and as the crew's initial complaint to the *Linaria's* captain clearly was. Thus, the Defence Committee's president (who was also an Independent councillor), commented at a fund-raising meeting in

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[11] *North Mail*, 24 February 1937; 5 March 1937; Alec Robson, *Spike: Alec 'Spike' Robson 1895-1979: Class Fighter*, North Tyneside TUC, North Shields, 1987, p.11.

[12] *North Mail*, 24 February 1937.

[13] Ibid., 22 February 1937.

[14] Ibid., 19 April 1937; Manchester Labour History Archive [MLHA], CP/CENT/PERS/5/05, Tom O'Byrne autobiography.

mid-April 1937 that he was 'not concerned so much with the rights and wrongs of the crew of the ship [...] as with ensuring the men had funds when they returned to Liverpool for the court case'.[15] Implicit in the Defence Committee's appeal published in the press was that the need to maintain non-intervention was at least as important a motivation as anti-fascism. Robson himself had also said this. The appeal noted a second motive in the crew's desire to avoid entering a war zone.[16] Though the press reports on the Defence Committee's few meetings were imprecise, the evidence that remains clearly suggests that the anti-fascist politics evident in the crew's strike action were down-played and that *Linaria* Defence Committee meetings were confined largely to raising money for the crew's court case rather than propagandising against fascism.

Finally in court, and charged for impeding the navigation of a vessel, anti-fascism again played a minor role. The crew's defence employed two main arguments, both of which had been prominent before the court case: firstly, that the crew acted solely to uphold non-intervention. This implied that they would have done the same if the cargo had been destined for a Republican port, as non-intervention theoretically treated both sides the same. The second and ultimately successful argument, in that it achieved a quashing of their earlier conviction, was that the crew had the right to refuse to enter a war zone.[17] Given the significance of the initial strike action, it is noteworthy that the campaign to support the *Linaria* crewmen appeared to have little impact. There were perhaps only three Defence Committee meetings in the region and the action of the crew, once the strike itself was over, appeared to excite remarkably little debate or controversy, which was surprising given the novel nature of the initial action.[18] Perhaps this was partly because so little had been made of the anti-fascist motives of the strike leader, and presumably most of the strikers, of whom only two signed back on the ship

[15] *North Mail*, 19 April 1937.

[16] Tom Buchanan, *The Spanish Civil War and the British Labour Movement*, Cambridge, 1991, p.212.

[17] *North Mail*, 4; 5 May and 7 June 1937.

[18] *Shields Gazette*, 13 March; 19 and 27 April 1937.

and went to Spain. (Of the remaining seventeen deportees, it is unclear how many merely did not wish to enter a war zone).

These considerations temper Don Watson and John Corcoran's claim that the crew's court victory was a 'notable victory for the Aid Spain movement'.[19] As far as the individual crewmen were concerned it was something of a victory as they could eventually return to their jobs, though Robson himself had a considerable fight on his hands before he finally achieved this. Yet in presenting the defence case in this way, tremendous potential anti-fascist political capital was sacrificed. Thus, the outcome of the trial and appeal was far more a victory for the British legal system, and what could be argued was the illegal non-intervention agreement, than it was for the crew. Watson and Corcoran claimed, plausibly, that 'Had more followed their [the crew's] example the government policy of "non-intervention" could have been under real pressure'.[20] Yet more people might have followed the example of the *Linaria* crew if the anti-fascist politics of its action had been crystal clear before, during and after the trial and appeal.

The Campaign to Support the Tynemouth Basque Refugee Children's Hostel

The Basque Children's Committee was formed in early May 1937 to support the 4,000 refugee children who came to Britain as victims of the Franco offensive on their homeland (between April and August 1937). A hostel for a group of these children was established in Tynemouth and a campaign mounted to fund it. As with the *Linaria* crew, but in quite a different way, the presence of children who could quite easily and justifiably be presented as the victims of fascist aggression allowed for wide-reaching anti-fascist propaganda opportunities. But once again this potential was not exploited for political purposes. In this case, the Tynemouth Hostel Committee was following

[19] Don Watson and John Corcoran, *An Inspiring Example: the North East of England and the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, London, 1996, p.20.

instructions from the national Basque Children's Committee, which had been formed from the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (an umbrella organisation that co-ordinated 'Aid Spain' activity) and the TUC. However, the Salvation Army, Quakers and the Catholic Church were also involved and this, combined with the express wishes of the Basque government, meant that the fund-raising campaign was conducted on purely humanitarian terms.[21] Thus, whilst anti-fascists motives must have informed the involvement of Nell Badsey, the communist warden of the hostel, and that of ILP members on the hostel's management committee, there were other members of it who were, in the words of communist Charlie Woods, 'actuated by the humanitarian nature of the appeal'.[22]

The Tyneside Foodship Campaign

The final set of campaigns were the 'foodships', that came as the Republic, in its final months of life, had to deal with an influx of refugees fleeing Franco's rapidly advancing forces. The Tyneside foodship campaign was by far the most widespread and concertedly energetic single 'Aid Spain' campaign in the north east. Whilst seventeen Spanish Medical Aid Committees emerged in the space of three years, 120 sub-committees of the Newcastle-based central foodship committee sprang up in less than three months after the campaign was launched in early December 1938.[23] Indeed, the Tyneside foodship campaign was one of, if not the, largest of the foodship campaigns

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[20] Ibid., p.22.

[21] Jim Fyrth, 'The Aid Spain Movement in Britain, 1936-39', *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.157; Mates, 'United Front', p.274.

[22] Marx Memorial Library [MML], BoxB-4/M/1, Charlie Woods letter to Jim Fyrth, 18 February 1985; Len Edmondson (b. Gateshead, 1913), Tape-recorded Interview with Lewis Mates, 19 June 1998.

[23] It is likely that there were a few more Spanish Medical Aid Committees that left no evidence of their existence, but surely not a hundred more.

North Mail, 7 February 1939.

(in terms of the numbers of sub-committees) and it became a model for others around Britain.[24] It raised £4,500, a 'great deal' from what was an economically depressed area.[25]

As suggested by its considerable size, those involved in the Tyneside foodship campaign were highly diverse in social and political terms. For example, the campaign's two presidents, though both aristocrats, were Labour left winger C.P. Trevelyan and Conservative Viscount Ridley; poles apart politically speaking. This diversity was reflected throughout the campaign, from its patrons to the activists in both the central and sub-committees. There was active involvement from members of trade unions, the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction (CAPR, a very small and unorthodox liberal group), Labour, Communist, Liberal and Conservative Parties, Co-operative Guilds, the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, book club groups, boys' clubs, the International Brigade, League of Nations Union (LNU, which included Liberals and Conservatives amongst its membership), the clergy, women's sections of the British Legion and the Town's Women's Guild. Those publicly supporting and donating to the appeal were even more diverse in terms of class, political and religious affiliation, and included a National Liberal PPC, Ex-Servicemen's Association groups and Women's Institutes.[26]

As with several of the other 'Aid Spain' campaigns, the main campaign organisers played down the politics of the conflict. For example, in early January 1939, central campaign organiser Thomas Tindle Anderson wrote: 'We are not concerned with the rights and wrongs of the present conflict in Spain'.[27] It is striking that throughout the

[24] Mates, 'United Front', pp.242-3, 251-2.

[25] *Spanish Relief*, March 1939.

[26] There appear to have been very few Conservatives involved in these campaigns.

Mates, 'United Front', pp.244-247.

[27] *Shields Gazette*, 3 January 1939.

campaign the central organisers did not once explicitly present the foodship as a way of combating Franco and fascism. Instead, they were consistently clear that the foodship was 'purely humanitarian' and 'non-political in aims'.[28] Another notable feature of the campaign was that the sub-committees, almost without exception, followed the central committee in the way they framed the campaign. Their message differed only in that some committees called for help to end the starvation of the 'Spanish people', whilst others specified that aid would go to refugees in Republican territory.[29] Only the Labour Party-controlled Gateshead sub-committee partially strayed from this non-political stance, but even there the politics was muted by humanitarianism. Apart from this, some of the speakers at a central foodship public meeting, in Newcastle on 22 January 1939, mentioned the politics of the Spanish conflict in association with the foodship campaign but, again, the overall message was confused and muted.[30] Overall, the constantly repeated humanitarian message from all the main campaign organisers must have had far more of an impact on the general populace.

Why the Humanitarian Message?

An emphasis on humanitarianism clearly played an important role in many of these campaigns, and there were many reasons for this. The Basque government's request, coupled with involvement of the Catholic Church, explains the humanitarian emphasis in the Basque Hostel campaign, and the desire not to jeopardise the *Linaria* crew's livelihoods meant that anti-fascism was underplayed in their campaign and court case. Clearly, many involved in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns that depicted their activity as a humanitarian mission rather than as a means of combating fascism were themselves involved because they *were* anti-fascists. Nell Badsey, the North Shields Communist who ran the Tynemouth Basque Hostel was an obvious example, as were several

[28] Ibid., 22 January 1939.

[29] Ibid., 17 January 1939; *Heslop's Local Advertiser*, 17 February 1939.

members of the foodship central committee, who had been anti-fascist activists for some years.[31]

However, humanitarianism also allowed for the involvement of individuals whose motives appeared quite different. A significant example of this was T.T. Anderson, the single most important foodship organiser in the region. With a conservative, middle-class background, Anderson was a grammar school teacher and 'well-known personality' who was involved in a great deal of charitable and social work.[32] A Quaker, Anderson appears to have become involved in the foodship campaign through the same kind of motives that led to his charity work: benevolent humanitarianism rather than anti-fascist politics. Certainly, he made no public anti-fascist statement before or during his involvement in the foodship campaign.

When some involved in the foodship, and other campaigns, emphasised the humanitarian and 'non-political' aims of the campaign, they were merely adhering to a tactical policy decision, presumably taken to minimise opposition to the fund and thereby maximise its financial success. But, when people like Anderson repeated the same mantras, it is likely that this was because they actually saw the campaign in those terms. Did anti-fascists allow the 'humanitarians' to set the agenda and simply acquiesce, or did they take the decision in order to bring humanitarians in, thereby broadening the campaign's base? Without detailed documentation, this question is impossible to answer for certain. The nearest understanding of the process can be gleaned in the foodship campaign, which was the best documented. There, the initiative first came from the Tyneside Joint Peace Council (TJPC), an organisation composed of communists, Labour Party and CAPR members and dedicated to organising anti-fascist

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[30] Mates, 'United Front', p.249-51.

[31] Ibid., pp.35, 192-221.

[32] *Shields Gazette*, 6 January 1939.

and anti-appeasement propaganda.[33] It thus looks likely that the TJPC working group decided to bring in a figure who was not obviously 'political' to head the campaign and to do this must have decided that a 'non-political' humanitarian stance was required. Certainly, the most prominent Labour left and communist TJPC activists were not obviously involved in the foodship campaign, but whether that was by their design, someone else's, or was merely fortune remains unclear.[34]

Whatever the process, for the anti-fascists to sacrifice the potential for political propaganda in the pursuit of greater financial success was surely a crucial mistake. Ultimately, the Republic needed arms to defeat fascism and, whilst food helped feed it and medicines helped patch up its wounded, without guns, shells and bullets it was never going to win. It could be argued, with some validity, that this was to misunderstand what the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were for; that the overtly 'political' demonstrations organised by the left parties against non-intervention were for placing this pressure on government, and that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were more about attempting to show solidarity in a tangible way. There may be some mileage in this argument, but, for the sheer amount of application and hard work put into these campaigns by anti-fascists, the political dividends for their cause appear very meagre. Of course, whether the National government would have changed its policy on Spain in the face of mass demonstrations and resolutions it received from anti-fascists, is another question. But the appeal to liberals in the popular front policy effectively precluded most calls for industrial direct action to force a change in government policy on Spain.

'Humanitarianism' vs. 'Politics'

[33] Mates, 'United Front', pp.35-40, 244.

The discussion so far has accepted that 'humanitarianism' and 'politics' are quite distinct. Of course, in reality there is no strict dividing line between the two concepts. In its widest sense, almost any human action or thought could be deemed 'political', but this definition is unhelpful. Moreover, when those keenest to defend the 'Aid Spain' campaigns' achievement provided counter arguments to the claim that they were humanitarian rather than politically based, they were thereby tacitly recognising a valid and significant distinction between the two. Thus, Jim Fyrth argued that: 'To collect, or even give food or money for Spain became a political act as well as a humanitarian one, because the collection was probably organised by people of left sympathies on behalf of people with a left-wing government opposed by the British government and abused by most of the Conservative media'.[35] Several points can be made in response. Firstly, a significant number of the organisers of some of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east clearly did not have 'left wing sympathies'. For examples, Viscount Ridley, or C.V.H. Vincent, a member of Jarrow foodship sub-committee and chairperson of Jarrow Conservative Association. Though he seemed relatively progressive, Vincent, midway through the foodship campaign, moved a motion conveying Jarrow Conservatives' 'loyal Christmas greetings' to Chamberlain, the arch-appeaser.[36]

Secondly, as has been shown, it was by no means clear that some of the collections being made were intended for the 'left-wing government' at all. The way the foodship campaign was framed, for example, suggested that it was intended to feed those who merely happened to find themselves in the 'left-wing government's territory' as an accident of war: the aid was never depicted as support for the Republican government itself. Of course, the aid would indirectly help the government's struggle, though by late

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[34] Or perhaps they were too busy, supporting Cripps' popular front campaign or running the Basque Tynemouth Hostel.

[35] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.162.

[36] *Shields Gazette*, 16 December 1938.

1938 only overwhelming military intervention on the Republic's side could have saved it. Thirdly, even if the collection had been organised entirely by the left in aid of a 'left-wing government', if those collecting had said the aid was for a humanitarian fund to help the innocent victims of war, then collecting for that fund was in no sense 'political'. The politics of the conflict that threatened the 'innocents' had been completely disregarded.

Similarly, Fyrth also claimed that the need to defeat fascism in Spain, the political aspect, and the humanitarian, 'were rarely separate in the minds of those taking part'.[37] This might have been the case, but it cannot be shown and seems to be wishful thinking. Those acting on political motives were also likely to have been moved by the human suffering, but the reverse does not follow. For the 'Aid Spain' campaigns that were presented in clear anti-fascist terms, it seems reasonable to assume that the money raised was largely from those who agreed with the analysis. However, the same cannot be said of the motives of those involved in the campaigns presented as humanitarian efforts.

This attempt to completely blend humanitarianism and politics was applied to the motives of donors who, Mike Squires claimed, were showing sympathy with the plight of the hungry in Spain and 'at the same time, although not always in a conscious way, registered their abhorrence of fascism, and their support of democracy'.[38] If by this Squires meant that donating to these appeals objectively aided the Republic's fight against fascism (albeit not greatly) whether the donor knew it or not, then this seems a reasonable, though somewhat futile, statement. If, however, this is a claim that all donors were sub-conscious anti-fascists, then that is another matter. It seems a little desperate, to say the least, to employ arguments based on speculation about the sub-

[37] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.162.

[38] Squires, *Aid to Spain Movement*, p.40.

conscious thoughts of large numbers of people. If all the 'Aid Spain' campaigns had been expressed in explicit anti-fascist terms, there would be a reasonable degree of certainty that donors *were* anti-fascist. As this was not always the case, it seems fairly clear that there was an important and relatively clear distinction between those donating to express anti-fascist sentiment and those wanting merely to help starving women and children, a humanitarian reason.

Politicisation?

Given the results of contemporary public opinion polls, many of which showed that the Republic had strong popular support in Britain, it could reasonably be argued that the majority of donors *were* anti-fascist. However, as many of the campaigns they donated to had not supplied an anti-fascist message in their appeals, it would seem that the vast majority of these people must have been anti-fascist anyway. Clearly the 'Aid Spain' campaigns framed in humanitarian terms were highly unlikely to have 'converted' them to anti-fascism. In other words, the level of politicisation brought about by the humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns must have been very low.

If individual cases are examined, it becomes clear that involvement in the humanitarian-based campaigns did not engender any obvious degree of 'politicisation' in the participants. Perhaps the most striking single example is that of T.T. Anderson, the main foodship organiser. His attitude to conscription, expressed in May 1939, revealed that his world-view had not altered. Though he wanted a guarantee that the 'conscience clause' would be strictly observed, he echoed statements on Spain when saying that he had no 'corporate view' on the 'rights and wrongs' of conscription and no desire to 'obstruct' it.[39] Anderson was not obviously involved with any overtly 'political' agitation in 1939. That the most high profile and active individual in the foodship

[39] *Shields Gazette*, 12 May 1939.

campaign was not obviously politicised by his involvement is significant as it appears that Anderson was representative of both that, and the other, humanitarian campaigns. The same was true of Conservatives such as C.V.H. Vincent of the foodship campaign. They did or said nothing after their involvement in the campaign that suggested their political perspective had altered in an anti-fascist direction. The same applies to those involved from the supposedly 'non political' Town's Women's Guilds, Women's Institutes, women's sections of the Royal British Legion and the various churches. The obvious assumption is that these individuals and groups perceived the issue in the terms in which it was presented: as a 'non-political', benevolent, humanitarian cause, and that this did not change.[40]

Though prominent Conservative and 'non-political' individuals involved in these campaigns do not appear to have been politicised, it is possible that similar but unnamed people who carried out door-to-door collections for the humanitarian campaigns were. This was Jim Fyrth's position, as he claimed that political arguments were essential to campaigning activities and that this changed individuals' political consciousness.[41] But did political arguments over the Spanish conflict necessarily have to enter doorstep discussions? The clearest indication on this came in the foodship campaign, when, in mid-January 1939, Anderson responded in the press to recurrent questions asked of collectors. Anderson cited a LNU report in order to counter the claim that foodship aid was helping the Republic as it was going solely to Republican civilians. The report stated that, due to a huge influx of refugees from Nationalist Spain, conditions in the Republic were both critical and entirely different to those in Franco territory. For this reason, Anderson argued, 'it would be unreasonable to treat both sides alike when the needs are different'.[42] The responses to several other questions

[40] Mates , 'United Front', pp.254-9.

[41] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, pp.162-163.

[42] *North Mail*, 19 January 1939.

also emphasised the non-political (i.e. politically neutral) and humanitarian nature of the campaign.

It seems reasonable to suppose that the responses Anderson supplied here were the self-same ones employed by collectors when asked about the partisanship of the campaign. Thus those collecting for humanitarian reasons were unlikely to be inadvertently politicised by their activities by being thrust reluctantly into political debates with prospective donors. If asked why they were collecting for the 'reds', the collector could avoid being compelled to engage in a discussion about the rights and wrongs of Franco and fascism simply by saying that the fund was to help starving and innocent Spanish women and children. Curiously, despite the Spanish Civil War being an ostensibly highly 'political' topic, politics *did not have to enter* the debate if the collector did not wish it to.

Of course, a collector could choose to defend the campaign on anti-fascist terms, but they were surely far more likely to do this if they already regarded the issue in a 'political' manner. And if, for example, the foodship collectors individually followed the lead of the anti-fascist central organisers who deliberately depicted the foodship as 'non-political', even this would not have happened. Ellen Wilkinson's comment about the national Basque Children's Committee seems apt for all the humanitarian-based 'Aid Spain' campaigns: 'No one has shifted their political or religious affiliations by a hair-breadth by working on that committee, but on big humanitarian issues, British people have somehow learned to co-operate'.[43] Tom Buchanan noted that the 'actual level of politicisation in these ['Aid Spain'] coalitions was very limited, not least due to the sheer, exhausting amount of practical work required'.[44] But *politicisation* could have

[43] *Sunday Sun*, 20 December 1936.

[44] Buchanan, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p.71.

occurred, despite (or perhaps even because of) the amount of work required, if these campaigns had been framed in explicitly anti-fascist terms.

This is not to argue that no one was politicised by involvement in the humanitarian-based 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Of course, politicisation *can* occur in the most unpromising of circumstances for the obscurest of reasons, but the rhetoric employed by activists to frame their campaigns serves to either maximise or minimise the potential for politicisation. And, given the rhetoric, surely those politicised by the humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns were a minor exception. A considerable element of 'Aid Spain' (the humanitarian) was unlikely to have done much at all to help 'awaken the British people to the nature of fascism'.[45] A final implication of this was that, because fund-raisers could quite easily side-step political discussion, the potential for politicising prospective donors on their doorsteps was also minimal. These considerations throw doubt on Jim Fyrth's claim that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns had a *palpable* political impact in that they made an important contribution to the 1945 Labour election landslide.[46] Surely, if this were the case, there would be at least some evidence of change occurring before war intervened to fundamentally alter the political landscape.

The Popular Front Debate

The debates around the humanitarianism of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns and the degree of politicisation within them are relevant to another area of discussion. This is the debate surrounding the popular front, a strategy aimed at an alliance of all anti-fascists that could win political power in democracies and then forge alliances between countries, including Soviet Russia, in order to contain the fascist threat. In Britain,

[45] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.162.

[46] Ibid., pp.162-163.

though the 'formal' campaigns for a popular front achieved little, some contemporary commentators saw great potential in the cross-party co-operation apparently achieved in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns. For example, Trevelyan, speaking in March 1939, thought that the popular front was achievable as 'All the local co-operation to help the Spaniards has proved it to be possible'.[47] This was echoed by historians such as Jim Fyrth, who claimed that 'The Aid for Spain Campaign was the nearest thing to a People's Front that came about in Britain'.[48] Implicit in these claims is the idea that the British popular front project had untapped potential because something similar came about 'unofficially' in the course of 'Aid Spain' campaigning work.

Two of the interconnected planks of the case for regarding the 'Aid Spain' campaigns as a de facto popular front were that their 'humanitarian' aspects were inextricable from their politics and that they therefore politicised many. Serious doubt has already been expressed on these claims, but a specific aspect of politicisation requires comment. If the 'Aid Spain' campaigns had represented potential support for the popular front, why was there not even an indication of this in the support that the popular front campaigns themselves garnered? In the north east, the popular front was never well received, with the United Peace Alliance campaign of 1938 rallying very little support. By the time Cripps launched his popular front 'Petition campaign' in January 1939, the foodship campaign was already in full-swing. Theoretically, the conditions could hardly have been better, as the foodship campaign was the largest and most significant 'Aid Spain' campaign in the north east. It was not only Trevelyan on the Cripps-supporting Labour left that recognised this potential. Announcing his support for Cripps' popular front memorandum, Arthur Blenkinsop (a Newcastle Labour PPC), argued that those who had recently worked on the foodship campaign 'understand how effective such co-

[47] Newcastle Robinson Library [NRL], CPT184, Notes for speech at Empress Stadium, 12 March 1939.

[48] Fyrth, *Signal*, p.22.

operation can be'.[49] Yet Blenkinsop's name did not figure in the foodship campaign and, more significantly, those involved in the foodship campaign generally did not emerge as Cripps supporters. So, for example, T.T. Anderson does not appear to have supported the Cripps campaign. In fact, the only names that do emerge in relation to both foodship and Cripps campaigns were those of left wingers like Trevelyan himself.

Regarding Liberals, only members of the tiny CAPR were involved in both the 'Aid Spain' and popular front campaigns. An indeterminate number of other liberals collected for the 'Aid Spain' campaigns as individuals, and some of the more prominent regional leaders expressed pro-Republic, anti-Franco views. But there was very little liberal support for the popular front in the north east. Viewing Labour as the main enemy, most liberal activists, and voters, sided with the Conservatives against Labour and liberal involvement in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, such as it was, had no obvious impact on these attitudes.[50] In an apparent attempt to show that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns *had* fed people into the popular front campaigns, Fyrth claimed that 'Aid Spain' activists were prominent in support of 'people's front' candidates in the elections autumn and winter 1938.[51] But Fyrth made no attempt to show that these individuals had been brought to supporting the popular front by their involvement in humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigning. Of course, some 'Aid Spain' campaigners would be expected to be also involved in the popular front, but, certainly in the north east, these individuals were almost exclusively left wingers who would have supported it regardless of their involvement in 'Aid Spain' campaigns.[52]

Other arguments employed regard contemporary perceptions. Fyrth claimed that 'very many of those involved in "Aid Spain" felt that they were also building a "People's Front

[49] *Tribune*, 27 January 1939.

[50] Mates, 'United Front', pp.160-231.

[51] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.161.

[52] Mates, 'United Front', pp.160-191.

from below"'.[53] Though no supporting evidence is presented, it seems quite likely that Communists and others already favourable to the popular front *did* think that they were involved in one in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns. But this does not mean that *they were right*. Unfortunately, it is impossible now to ask individuals like T.T. Anderson about their perceptions of the campaigns, but, given the evidence that there is of their words and actions during and after the campaigns, it seems unlikely that they would have agreed with Fyrth's claim.

The perceptions of those who were not involved have also been employed to bolster the 'de facto popular front' argument. Thus, Fyrth claimed that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were regarded (and feared) by the Labour leadership as 'backdoor' popular fronts that were making communists respectable.[54] It is possible that the leadership felt threatened by these campaigns, because, as Fyrth explained, they brought Labour Party members into contact with communists. However, the threat was not deemed great enough in the north east to actually expel Labour Party members for their involvement.[55] Moreover, if the leadership did fear these campaigns, this can be explained as merely another case of its communist paranoia clouding its judgement. Communists did not appear, for the most part, to have been made 'respectable' by involvement in the humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns, simply because politics were not discussed. As Len Edmondson, an ILP activist, noted, within these campaigns 'none of it [politics] was ever raised then. It didn't interfere with any of the local activity on behalf of aid for Spain'.[56]

In fact, it seems likely that the majority of those involved in the humanitarian campaigns were unaware that they were organising with communists. Certainly, the

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[53] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p161.

[54] Ibid., p.160.

[55] Mates, 'United Front', pp.130-1.

[56] Len Edmondson Interview, 19 June 1998.

prominent communists involved were not identified as such in the press. For example, a foodship press appeal signed by Sunderland dignitaries included the name of Frank Graham, but there was no indication that he was a communist or even an ex-International Brigade member. The same can be said of other mentions Graham had in the press in relation to the foodship campaign.[57] Individual communists must surely have gained 'respect' for their energetic activities in these campaigns, but this respect was accorded to them *as individuals*, not as communists. There was, indeed, a tacit recognition of this when communist Hymie Lee, commenting on the north east situation in March 1939, complained that: 'in all the mass activity we are hiding the face of the party. Communists are working everywhere but they don't show that they are communists'.[58] It seems that individual communists only achieved an apparent air of respectability precisely because their party affiliation was not broadcast.

The north east CP's predicament in March 1939 throws light on another aspect of the claim that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns politicised. Noreen Branson wrote that communists had begun to understand 'that if you can lead people into action on some issue on which they feel strongly, the very experience itself can bring about a change in their ideas […] whereas you seldom convert anyone to socialism by preaching from the sidelines'.[59] Though ostensibly reasonable, this claim does not explain why the foodship campaign did not bring any direct benefit to the party in the form of new recruits. In fact, far from increasing in early 1939, north east CP membership actually *decreased* by ten percent (fifty individuals).[60] This came in the context of CP membership at national

[57] Frank Graham, *The Battle of Jarama*, Newcastle, 1987, p.34.

[58] MML, Microfilm, CP Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939.

[59] Noreen Branson, 'Myths from Right and Left' in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front*, London, 1985, p.127.

[60] CP Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939.

level hitting a 'plateau' between January and July 1939.[61] Yet, even by national standards, the decline in Tyneside, a district that already had a low membership, was little short of disastrous. When, in March 1939, Lee complained that the regional party had no profile despite its activity, he added that: 'there is no feeling about the party growing', and these two observations surely must have been causally linked.[62] The energetic but anonymous Communist activity in the foodship, and other humanitarian campaigns, had, not surprisingly, brought little or no success in converting people to 'socialism'. Of course, the overtly 'political' demonstrations organised by the CP, the campaigns it helped organise that *were* framed in explicitly political terms and its organising of the International Brigade did bring recruits to the party. But the party would surely have gained more by channelling its energies into only those 'Aid Spain' campaigns that were overtly anti-fascist, and eschewing those with a 'non-political', humanitarian-basis.[63]

Ultimately, it is insufficient to remark that, as some of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns looked like popular fronts in action, that is what they must have been. The popular front was a political project. Its two most basic building-blocks were anti-fascism and, one step up from this, a critique of the Chamberlain government's appeasement policy, because it was regarded as pro-fascist. Inspired by David Blaazer's work, this definition of a 'popular front outlook' seems the widest tenable in a British context.[64] Yet, even with this inclusive theoretical framework, it is clear that some, often important, individuals in the humanitarian-based 'Aid Spain' campaigns did not share this 'popular front

[61] Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', *Historical Journal*, 43:3, 2000, p.783.

[62] CP Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939.

[63] Of course, as indigenous fascism was defeated in the region by 1935, practical anti-fascism for the left could only manifest itself in support for the Spanish Republic and those fighting fascism elsewhere abroad.

[64] David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition*, Cambridge, 1992, passim.

outlook', nor did they adopt one as a result of the politicisation process that any truly 'political' campaign has on a good degree of its participants.

The underlying unifying factor in these cases was humanitarianism. It might be argued that, as these funds went to the Republic, these individuals were acting as unconscious (or 'objective') anti-fascists, but that is simply not enough. The popular front demanded a positive political stand on some of the most pressing issues of the day, and these individuals either did not make one, or, if they did, it was not to side with the popular fronters. All the north east 'Aid Spain' campaigns that looked like popular fronts in terms of those involved (with perhaps the *Linaria* Defence Committee as a relatively insignificant exception) sacrificed the politics of the situation in Spain in order to employ a strictly humanitarian campaigning message. With only a couple of exceptional occasions, none of these campaigns organised meetings with 'speakers from all parties supporting the Republic' and they did not campaign against non-intervention, a clearly political stance.[65] The evidence of 'Aid Spain' campaigns in north east supports Buchanan's claim that 'there is no evidence that humanitarian work for Spain on a Popular Front basis translated into effective political action'.[66] In fact, it appears that these campaigns only achieved the appearance of a popular front at all precisely *because* the Spanish conflict was *not* depicted in a 'political' manner. Thus the de facto popular front based around these campaigns was no more than an illusion. If the humanitarian-based 'Aid Spain' campaigns are all that supporters of the popular front strategy can cite in its defence, then it is clear that the strategy was never viable in nineteen thirties Britain.

Final Debates: Working Class Attitudes, the Role of Communists and the '"Aid Spain" Movement'

[65] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.161.

[66] Buchanan, *Spanish Civil War*, p.139.

Some final areas of the debate between Tom Buchanan and Jim Fyrth require comment. Firstly is the attitude of the British working class to the conflict. Buchanan pointed out that Fyrth excluded 'discordant experiences', such as working class internationalism that was pro-Franco.[67] Buchanan also noted that Fyrth did not properly consider the concerns of working class Catholics, some of whom left the Labour Party over the issue. Whilst Buchanan was right to observe that it was unsatisfactory to represent Catholic opposition as 'aberrant', it appears that he himself may have slightly overstated the Catholic labour movement opposition to the party's stance on Spain. Certainly, in the north east, which had the second largest population of Catholics in England, there is hardly any evidence of open labour movement Catholic hostility to the Republic. Indeed, in places such as Jarrow, with the highest concentration of labour movement Catholics in the region, the party and its MP, Ellen Wilkinson, did a great deal in support of the Republic.[68] In the north east, the working class movement acted in support of the Republic, through both official and unofficial channels, and seemed to be relatively well supported by ordinary working class people. Yet the impression given by many of the humanitarian 'Aid Spain' campaigns was that the middle classes spoke from the public platforms and played leading roles in many of the committees, whilst the working classes, who could least afford it, were those who provided the bulk of the donations. Given the minimal political impact that these humanitarian campaigns had (both in Britain and in Spain), the very real sacrifices made by many working class people in these campaigns were simply not justified.

Secondly is the disagreement over the role of communists in the campaigns, Buchanan claiming that they should not necessarily be credited with the 'leading historical role' in

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[67] Buchanan, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p.65.

[68] Mates, 'United Front', pp.79-108.

'Aid Spain' activities.[69] Though Fyrth appeared very quick to establish that communists were behind every campaign in his book, his reply to Buchanan was more measured. Whilst communists were not dominant in 'Aid Spain' as a whole, Fyrth argued , they did dominate or were prominent in some organisations and very active in many.[70] In the north east communists were clearly at the centre of some campaigns, for examples, Alex Robson, the *Linaria* strike leader, Nell Badsey the Tynemouth Basque Hostel warden and Wilf Jobling, in Blaydon Spanish Medical Aid Committee. However, the communists involved in the larger and more popular of the campaigns, such as the foodship, appeared swamped by others who did not share even their broad views on the international situation. If these communists had tried to influence others in a 'left-ward' direction, they had clearly failed to have an impact. Certainly, being prominent in a particular 'Aid Spain' organisation did not necessarily indicate 'political dominance' of it. It is also striking that in, for example, many of the Spanish Medical Aid committees there are no identifiable communists. This must partly be due to the paucity of evidence, but must also indicate that in many of these committees communists were not a force at all. In the north east, what can be safely said is that communists were involved in many (but probably not all) 'Aid Spain' campaigns, that sometimes they were also prominent, but that 'dominance' seems unlikely in the larger campaigns. Certainly, as has been seen, despite this extensive communist activity, the regional party itself gained very little from all its work.

Finally, there was the question of whether it is legitimate to talk of, in Fyrth's lexicon, an 'Aid Spain movement'. Buchanan complained that Fyrth did not define the 'Aid Spain movement' and asserted that 'Aid Spain' 'did not exist as a national political entity and had no institutional basis'.[71] The 'real hallmark of "Aid Spain" was its very diversity', claimed Buchanan, and that 'this very diversity denies the character of a "mass

[69] Buchanan, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p.67.

[70] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.160.

movement".[72] In response, Fyrth asked, quite reasonably, 'Is not diversity an *essential* condition of mass movements in countries with pluralist traditions?'[73] Fyrth's counter argument that movements do not necessarily have a 'formal national existence' was also convincing, and on those terms it seems that there was a case for using the term 'Aid Spain movement'. But the crux of this discussion is in Buchanan's question: 'What *united* these diverse phenomena beyond a broad internationalist sympathy with the people and workers of Spain and hatred of fascism?'[74] Surely, the factors that Buchanan recognised here as uniting the campaigns would be enough to justifiably apply the term 'movement' to them. The problem arises, of course, if we apply this statement to the individuals involved in 'Aid Spain' campaigns. Then, as the case of the north east has shown, the uniting force was not, in many of the most important campaigns, a 'hatred of fascism' at all, rather it was a 'humanitarian sympathy' with the people of Spain.

Conclusions

One of Jim Fyrth's stranger claims, in response to Buchanan's point that the 'Aid Spain' campaigns were 'spectacularly unsuccessful in affecting the politics of the labour movement or government', was that it was 'arguable' that 'the growing support for the Republic, which undoubtedly owed much to the Aid Spain campaigns, prevented the British government from more open support of Franco'.[75] Short of actually supporting Franco militarily, it is difficult to imagine how the British government could have been more pro-Franco, given how the sham of non-intervention effectively supported his forces and weakened the Republic. The British government's attitude was quite clear to most; it did not need spelling out. (And the 'Aid Spain' campaigns surely owed far more

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[71] Buchanan, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p.62.

[72] Ibid., p.71.

[73] Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.156.

[74] Buchanan, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p.71.

[75] Ibid., p.70; Fyrth, *History Workshop Journal*, 35, 1993, p.163.

to the growing support for the Republic than the other way round). But the spectacular lack of success of these campaigns (on Buchanan's terms) was at least in part due to the fact that many of them did not even attempt to alter either labour movement politics or the government's attitude. Instead, many aimed at raising the most money they could for suffering civilians in the Republic by framing a 'non-political' campaign. It was not to the left's credit that Franco-supporting Catholics also often neglected to mention who the aid was for.[76]

Tom Buchanan's claim that, whilst consisting of broad coalitions of individuals and institutions both within and without the labour movement, 'Aid Spain' at local level was *not* a 'political project', is partly confirmed by the evidence of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns in the north east.[77] However, as has been seen, it would be wrong to view all the highly diverse 'Aid Spain' campaigns as being essentially the same. Certainly, it is clear that all the campaigns that took on the appearance of popular fronts were humanitarian based, but many of the Spanish Medical Aid committees were not as politically diverse and they expressed the issue in clear anti-fascist terms. This was the most important distinction to be made in the supposed 'Aid Spain movement'. With this in mind, James Klugmann's claim that there were three levels of support for the Republic can be assessed. The highest level, for Klugmann, was fighting in the International Brigade and there was a middle level of political action against non-intervention. The third level was one of 'extraordinarily broad' support for the Republic on the basis of foodships, medicines, and so forth that 'involved people of all political opinions […] It was an extremely broad, humanitarian movement'.[78] In the north east, the majority of those

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[76] For example, in a letter asking for donations to the *Catholic Universe's* Medical Fund for Spain, G. Keenan claimed that the funds were for the 'sick and wounded in Spain', but did not specify on which side. *Newcastle Journal*, 2 January 1937.

[77] Buchanan, *History Workshop Journal*, 31, 1991, p.71.

[78] J. Klugmann, 'The Crisis of the Thirties: a View From the Left' in J. Clark, M. Heinemann, D. Margolies & C. Snee, *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the 30s*, London, 1979, p.19.

who were involved in these campaigns experienced the third 'humanitarian' level. However, elements of some campaigns, such as Blaydon Spanish Medical Aid committee, seem to have occupied an area that straddled the third and second levels.

Ultimately though, by accident or by design, anti-fascism did not play a significant part in many of the most important of the 'Aid Spain' campaigns, which is a quite striking feature given how 'political' the whole situation in Spain was. At Labour annual conference in October 1936, one of the most devastating attacks on the leadership's support for non-intervention came from a north eastern delegate. C.P. Trevelyan told the Labour leadership: 'You are beggared of policy at this moment [...] When the last great war that is looming comes […] I hope then the Labour Party will have some other policy to offer than sympathy, accompanied by bandages and cigarettes'.[79] It was somewhat ironic that, hamstrung by its support for the popular front, the left that Trevelyan represented could not come up with a better, practical policy for aiding the Republic and fighting fascism during these years.

[79] Report of the Thirty-sixth Annual Labour Party Conference, Edinburgh, 1936, pp.172-73.