WAS THE INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY REVOLUTIONARY?

The Independent Labour Party (ILP) was famous for being the effective founders of what became the Labour party. But it is primarily known for have failed and ultimately was effectively defunct by the end of the 1930’s. Its most important leader was Keir Hardie, who essentially founded the Labour party, but he could not oppose the increasingly pragmatic and opportunist evolution of the Labour party and so was unable to provide an alternative for the involvement of this organisation in the coalition government in the first world war. In other words, the ILP is known to be a party that is defined by a situation of tragic failure, and the increasingly lack of practical credibility of this organisation. Ultimately the ILP became obscure, and it was effectively irrelevant by the late 1930’s. Most of the early leaders of the ILP like Ramsey Macdonald and Philip Snowdon left it to become important figures in the Labour party, and the foremost leader Keir Hardie became marginalised and defeated by the increasing important of the opportunist politics of what became an essentially reformist organisation that was represented by Labour. But this history of the ILP which seems to be an expression of a process of prolonged defeat and increasing obscurity can be considered in different terms in that the ILP has historically established what could be considered to be the most effective expression of a principled conception of socialist politics. In contrast other groups like the Communist party were undermined by a process of Stalinist degeneration but the ILP attempted to uphold the aims of socialism in a principled manner despite increasingly adverse political circumstances. It could be argued that Fenner Brockway, one of the leaders in the 1930’s, was still providing one of the most convincing arguments in favour of socialism, and GDH Cole provided a credible strategy of revolutionary change in terms of the role of guild socialism and the importance of industrial democracy. Many of the leading members of the ILP were to become important left-wing figures within the Labour party, and it could be argued that without the role of the ILP the Labour party may not have become motivated to become the important reforming party of the period 1945-51. However, the ultimate problem of the ILP was that since 1914 it became a declining party and its popular appeal to the working class was undermined by the political challenges of this period. But ultimately it could be suggested that the ILP became less important because its relationship to the Labour was increasingly undermined in the period after 1914. It could be suggested that its failure to meet the challenges of the period since 1914 meant that this political organisation underwent what seemed to be a process of inevitable decline. What we will try to establish is whether this regressive development could have been challenged in an effective manner. If the ILP had adopted what could be said to be more effective and principled politics could it have then been possible to avoid this apparent process of the decline of the organisation? These issues will be addressed in terms of an evaluation of an important book by Keith Laybourn: “The Independent Labour Party 1914-1939” (Routledge, Abingdon Oxon 1920) He suggests that it was the first world war which began the development of the decline of the ILP: “However, during the Great War 1914-1918 the ILP dramatically lost support and influence owing to the public perception that it was a pacifist organisation, though it actually practiced liberty of conscience for all its members who were deeply divided on the Great War despite the decision of its 1915 ILP Annual conference to pass a pacifist resolution. It lost about a third of its membership between 1914 and 1916 but recovered much of that lost membership when the peace campaign began seriously in 1917.” (p2) He suggests that this development began a period of prolonged political crisis that was expressed over the issues of what policy to adopt concerning the Labour government of 1924 and relationship with the emerging communist parties. In other words, the ILP had a prolonged crisis because of its failure to relate theoretical perspectives to the complex challenges posed by difficult empirical situations. Hence the conclusion being made is that the ILP was unable to respond to new challenges in a convincing manner that would enable this organisation to become stronger and more influential. Instead, the lack of credible politics of the ILP meant that a process of inevitable decline was the result. We will have to try and establish whether this is a credible basis for understanding the apparent decay of the ILP. The point is could it have been possible for the ILP to maintain its importance despite the problems posed by an increasingly complex political situation.

In other words, did the ILP commit a serious mistake when it decided to leave the Labour party, as Laybourn suggests, or was this decision an inevitability given the increasing differences between these two political organisations? In other words, was the ILP the creator of its own problems such as the controversial decision to leave the Labour party, or was its decline the result of adverse circumstances that meant it could not promote a type of socialism that was independent of the role of wither the Labour party or communist party? However, in terms of explaining the role of the ILP it could be suggested that it was always motivated by what it conceived to be the expression of the aim of socialism and so it considered that its decision to leave the Labour party was motivated by the increasing accommodation of this organisation to the acceptance of capitalism. In other words, there was an inevitable contradiction between the attempt to maintain political principles with the objective of trying to maintain effective influence. It could be suggested that the ILP could have maintained its importance by trying to establish cooperative relations with the leadership of the Labour party, who had often been ILP members. But instead of this possible temptation to uphold opportunism, it is being suggested by Laybourn that the ILP upheld a type of dogmatic politics that was increasingly at odds with the views of the working class: “Its purity of thought, its atomism and individuality was ill-fitted with the plurality of working-class ideas, thoughts and actions which needed a broader canvas in British society during the inter-war years. In the end, British society and politics changed and broadened; the ILP did not. It failed to change with the times but rather fragmented into isolation and obscurity.” (p14) But the problem with this conclusion is that it suggests the essentially opportunist view that the problem with the ILP was that it defended and justified the aim of socialism when people were increasingly supportive of other perspectives. In other words, the very justification of a principled support for socialism was actually the problem, and that the ILP may have benefitted from becoming a more flexible or even opportunist type of party. But there already was this form of political party and it was called the Labour party. Hence in order to be principled and faithful to the aims of socialism the ultimate objective of the ILP had to be to criticise the opportunist rejection of the standpoint of socialism by the Labour party. Hence the ILP had no alternative than to be the most ardent and consistent defenders of the aim of socialism. If they failed in this task, it could still be shown that they had attempted to uphold principled objectives. This would mean that such a failure would not be in vain and instead people could still learn from the history of the ILP the meaning and character of the genuine expression of the objective of socialism. Without the ILP the reformist role of the Labour party would not have been opposed in an effective manner. Instead, as long as the ILP was a credible political party it could express the principles of the objective of transforming capitalism into socialism. They could show that the limitations of the Labour party and Labour governments was because they rejected the aims and principles being promoted by the ILP. Hence even in times of its apparent decline the ILP always had an invaluable role as the political conscience of the labour movement. Hence it was not being outdated, contrary to the views of Laybourn. Therefore, the demise of the ILP meant the possibility to influence the Labour party in left wing terms was greatly undermined. The fact was that the ILP often functioned as the conscience of the Labour party and promoted a conception of socialist transformation by which it could contrast with the often opportunist limitations of various Labour governments and the leadership of the Labour party. Thus, it could be suggested that the decline of the ILP meant an undermining of the very importance of the influence of the aim of socialism. The other left-wing organisations lacked the progressive importance of the ILP and the Communist party was compromised by its support for the Stalinist character of the Soviet Union.

However, it is suggested by Laybourne that the decline of the ILP effectively started in 1914 when the ILP become divided between different groupings that either supported or opposed the war in pacifist terms. But he also outlines how the official policy of the ILP was for the principled stance of peace without annexations. So, despite the importance of different views within the ILP concerning the attitude to war, the overall approach was based on the support for the realisation of peace and an end to the conflict. Laybourne suggests that the very principled attempt of the ILP to uphold a position of peace without annexations in relation to the first world war was problematical and led to the decline of its influence and instead led to the increasing ascendency of the Labour party which placed doubts about the continuation of the ILP: “The great war exerted enormous pressure upon the ILP. At its outset, the ILP was the largest and most effective parliamentary socialist party in Britain. However, during the war, the ILP membership and its leadership was deeply divided, with many members leaving for the Labour party as it alienated trade union support, challenged the labour party’s pro-war stance in the wartime coalition government and gained an exaggerated reputation for pacifism. These factors all undermined the ILP’s power and influence, a situation further compounded by the Labour party’s adoption of a socialist constitution in 1918…..The ILP would never again be able to match the power and influence of the relatively conservative trade unions and their block vote within the labour party and was now faced with the dilemma of whether or not to continue.”(p44) But the point is that the ILP was already established as being part of the Labour party and was able to express itself as the principled and radical expression of the most committed defenders of the aim of socialism. In this context the principled support for peace during the first world war was confirmation of the principled character of the ILP and of how it connected support for a genuine internationalism as the basis to promote the realisation of socialism. In contrast the opportunist role of the Labour party indicated that it effectively upheld the interests of British capitalism as being more important than adherence to the aim of socialism. Hence the ILP had a crucially important role as being the principled defender of the objectives of peace and socialism within the Labour party. The ILP could indicate that by its political role it was the most consistent supporter of the aims of the perspective of international socialism. In contrast the leadership of the Labour party had proved to be the expression of the aims of British imperialism and so in this manner had compromised the objectives of international socialism. However, it is suggested by Laybourne that the adoption of the 1918 constitution by the Labour party implied the effective end of the role of the ILP. The labour party had become committed to the objective of socialism, but the point was that the ILP was required in order to try and ensure that the Labour party would actually act in government in order to realise this aim of the constitution. In other words, the Labour party had shown by its opportunist approach towards world-war one that its overall approach was based on the defence of the interests of British capitalism. In contrast the pacifist approach of the ILP indicated that it was the serious supporters of the objectives of peace and socialism. The ILP had a vital role as the conscience of the Labour party and of trying to ensure that the Labour leadership would remain committed to the aims of internationalism and socialism. The ILP had shown by its committed support for peace during world-war one that it was of a principled character and so would aspire to ensure that a Labour government would act in order to advance the realisation of the aims of socialism. Hence the adoption of the 1918 constitution did not indicate the irrelevancy of the ILP but instead indicated its importance as a force that would attempt to promote the realisation of this programme. Only the ILP was principled because of its very internationalist position during world-war one, and in contrast the Labour party leadership was opportunist and unprincipled. Thus, the ILP had proved that it had a vital role as the principled conscience of the Labour party and that the opportunist character of the leadership of the Labour party could be opposed by the very development of the effectiveness and importance of the role of the ILP. It was the very principled credibility of the ILP during the war years of 1914-18 which indicated the necessity of its influence if the Labour party was to act in a principled manner when in government, and so in that sense attempt to realise the aims of its 1918 constitution.

In other words, the primary aims of the ILP should have been to influence the Labour party to adhere to the aim of the introduction of the principles of the 1918 constitution such as the nationalisation of the economy by a democratically elected government. But the ILP does not seem to have upheld this type of perspective because it was instead concerned with the issue of what would be the most appropriate and principled strategy for the realisation of socialism. In the 1920’s it became supporters of GDH Cole’s guild socialism and his aim of the establishment of economic democracy of the producers as the basis to organise a socialist economy: “Nevertheless, between 1918 and 1922, the ILP made some significant progress. First, of all, it convinced itself that it still had a distinct role to play in the creation of a socialist state in Britain. Secondly, this effectively meant offering different policies from those offered by the newly socialist Labour party and a possible veering away from the socialism of the founding fathers of the ILP. But this was to take it into emphasising workers control and guild socialism, which was designed to solve the economic and social problems of society. The trouble is that, whilst the 1922 constitution was a neat solution to squaring its political and industrial policies, it was an unpopular balancing act and held no widespread appeal within the British labour movement. Guild socialism obtained some support for a few years…. on the basis of debating its future, the ILP was able to build up its organisational strength, and the 1922 general election, following the introduction of its 1922 constitution saw it make its biggest breakthrough in history.” (p65-66) In other words there was popular support for what had become the distinctive perspective of the ILP. This expressed the aim of connecting the development of influence within parliament with support for mass struggles of the workers to create the possibility of industrial democracy in order to challenge the domination of capital within the economy. Such an approach could have become the basis to develop support for the approach of the ILP within the Labour party. For the 1923 general election the ILP advocated its ‘The Socialist Programme: The Constructive Proposal of the Independent Labour Party’. However, Laybourn considers that there were problems concerning the perspective of socialism via the role of increased public ownership within the economy: “However, it was not at all clear what form of public control would emerge. In some parts of the proposals, it would appear that there would be nationalisation, whilst in others a suggestion of municipal control and, to confuse matter further, there was the suggestion that ‘Public control would mean public ownership and workers control in its widest sense’. This was a reference to the guild socialist ideas adopted by the ILP in 1922. However, what this programme failed to perceive is that nationalisation, municipalisation and workers control were all different forms of control, that a commitment to a parliamentary system that undermined any notion of the permanence of socialism, and that there was always the potential for conflict between workers and their trade unions, on the one hand, and the state on the other, even within the interrelated guild system. This dichotomy…. was to become a major problem with the Labour party, which could only progress slowly to socialism and along the route of nationalisation rather than the plurality of forms which the ILP seemed to be advocating.” (p79) But surely the very task of the ILP was to try and obtain support within the Labour party for what was the most principled and convincing conception of a process of transition to socialism. In other words, there was an important difference between the ILP and the Labour government of 1924 because this administration considered that its task was to manage capitalism in national and international terms, whilst the ILP promoted a perspective of transition to socialism via the role of increased economic democracy of the producers. The dilemma for the ILP was that whilst it could be critical of the moderation of the Labour government it could not establish a credible strategy by which more radical aims could be established. For example, it does not seem to have suggested that workers should act immediately in order to increase their influence and importance in organising the economy. The ILP does not seem to have advocated a strategy of class struggle which could have resulted in changing the balance of class forces in favour of the workers within society. However, to some extent these issues started to become addressed when the ILP began to advocate the introduction of a living or minimum wage by a Labour government. This perspective implied that the workers should act in order to facilitate the possibility for a Labour government to introduce a minimum wage, but this programme was not outlined in tactical and strategic terms.

The problems with the approach of the ILP is indicated by the programme adopted in 1926: “Socialism in Our Time.” (p215-217) It is maintained that: “The ILP sets before itself the object of winning socialism for this generation. The scourge of unemployment, the failure of capitalist industry to re-organise itself after the check of the Great War, our daily experience of the intensified struggle between the possessing classes and the workers are proof that the old order is breaking down. The situation demands a conscious and resolute socialist policy, planned deliberately to carry us rapidly through the period of transition from the old to the new civilisation.” (p215) But this analysis does not establish how the workers will be able to develop the influence and capacity to realise this perspective. Instead, it is suggested in a vague manner that the Labour party should attempt to advance the realisation of the aim of the minimum wage: “In the view of the ILP, the Labour party in parliament should not be satisfied with opposing the actions of the government, but should seek any and every opportunity of asserting the demand for a living wage and of advocating the broad socialist programme through which alone it can be realised. The ILP considers that the Labour party should make it clear that it will introduce this programme whenever the opportunity to take office recurs. Immediate steps should be taken to prepare measures for the necessary economic re-organisation, so that Labour may be ready to introduce them without delay.”(p216) There is a call for trade union action in order to facilitate the realisation of this programme but what is not addressed is the issue of the opportunist limitations of the reformist character of the Labour party which means that it will be reluctant to introduce radical measures in favour of the interests of the workers when in government. Indeed, the problematical relationship of the Labour party and the ILP is the very issue that is not addressed by this programme. Instead, a call is made for the ILP members of parliament to act to advance the realisation of socialism, but the very issue of the opportunist and reformist role of the labour party is not addressed by this perspective. Thus, the vague perspective is advocated whereupon: “The ILP calls upon all its members to devote themselves unsparingly in Parliament, in their trade unions, in every branch of public life, and in the day to day task of propaganda and organisation, to the fulfilment of this policy of transition from capitalism to socialism. Our task is to intensify the challenging spirit within the Labour movement, and to educate the public to understand the need for rapid and fundamental change. Our privilege it is by devoted service, the fighting spirit and constructive capacity to convert socialism into a practical reality.” (p217) Hence the very issue that is not tackled is the importance of the opportunist character of the Labour party which has become a supporter of reformism and opponent of the aim of the genuine socialist transformation of society. The very relevant and important issue of the political problems expressed by the increasing opportunist character of the Labour party are being apparently ignored in this analysis of the aims of the ILP.

However, the constitution of the ILP adopted in 1922 indicates a credible perspective of change based on the following approach: “The Independent Labour party takes its part in the struggle of the workers to win freedom from economic tyranny imposed by the capitalist class and capitalist state. It holds that the best way of effecting a peaceful change to socialism is by the organisation of the workers politically to capture the power of the state and industry to take over the control and management of the industrial machine.”(p214) This commitment to the importance of the mass mobilisation of the workers combined with the aims of the realisation of a situation of economic democracy is an indication that the ILP had a credible and principled objectives concerning the aim of the transformation of capitalism into socialism. But what has not been tackled is the very problem of the opportunist role of the Labour party which is essentially committed to limited changes rather than the realisation of the aim of socialism. The point is that the very objective of the promotion of the mass activity of the workers in order to achieve progress towards the socialist transformation of society is something that will be undermined by the opportunist and reformist role of the Labour party. Therefore, the ILP has to establish how it will address the issue of the problematical role of the Labour party concerned the issue of the development of the class struggle and achieving socialism. But the relationship of the ILP to the Labour party is the very issue that seems to be evaded in the elaboration of the constitution of the ILP. In other words what is being ignored is the very importance of political and ideological struggle with the Labour party if the objective of socialism is to be progressed and advanced. The ILP will have to carry out ideological struggle with the Labour party if the promotion of socialism is to be established in the most effective political manner. Indeed, the ILP has to establish that the reformist character of the Labour party is an important problem with regards to the prospect of the realisation of socialism. It is necessary for the ILP to carry out an ideological struggle in order to replace the political supremacy of the Labour party with its alternative influence. But this is the very issue that is not being addressed by the ILP in its constitution. This issue acquires increasing importance when the Labour government of 1924 proved to be very moderate and concerned merely to uphold the continuation of capitalism. The ILP seems to have evaded the recognition of the necessity for it to conduct ideological and political struggle with the Labour government and to effectively promote an alternative approach. Instead in a vague manner it conducted campaigns in favour of a minimum wage but did not establish how this could be realised by a limited and effectively reformist Labour government of 1924. There was necessity for the ILP to conduct systematic political struggles against the limitations of this Labour administration, but it was hindered by the very fact that Macdonald the Prime Minster was a supporter of the ILP! Indeed, it could be argued that only the adoption of ‘Socialism in Our Time’ in 1926 was an indication that the ILP had decisively recognised that the character of the objectives of progressive change could no longer be associated primarily with the role of the Labour party and that instead it was necessary to establish a distinctive and genuinely independent approach concerning the attempt to realise socialism. But the problem was that this increasingly critical standpoint was not connected to a strategy of how to struggle within the Labour party in order to try and achieve the objectives of the ILP. Therefore, the political logic of the approach of the ILP was towards the conclusion that it was time to end organisational relations with the Labour party. This approach was ultimately realised in the early 1930’s. But ultimately the problem was that the ILP did not conduct a convincing campaign to obtain support for the view that the Labour party would never attempt to realise socialism. Hence the problem was that the ILP did not seem able to promote a convincing perspective of how to achieve socialism given its effective suggestion that the Labour party was inherently reformist and opportunist. How could a socialist party be created given the influence of the Labour party which seemed to undermine the development and expression of a credible left-wing perspective? This was the very issue that the ILP seemed reluctant to tackle, and instead it seemed to be assumed in a dogmatic manner that it would be possible to advocate a genuine socialist programme and that mass support for its approach could be automatically created. In other words, the very importance of the Labour party concerning the problems of making progress towards socialism were being ignored by the ILP and instead it advocated its programme in 1926 in the dogmatic terms of trying to avoid the issues associated with developing the influence of its approach. In other words, the ILP lacked a tactic for trying to create increased support for a socialist programme within the Labour party. Indeed, they seemed reluctant to carry out ideological struggle against the reformist role of the Labour party. Instead in an abstract and dogmatic manner they argued in favour of the aims of socialism and so failed to establish how they would strive to advance the importance of this aim within what was accepted to be the reformist role of the Labour party. It was in this context that the programme of ‘Socialism in Our Time’ was adopted.

It is suggested by Laybourne that the ‘Socialism in Our Time’ programme never developed popular support to make it a credible possibility. But surely the problem was that this policy was not connected in a convincing manner to a programme for the development of mass struggle in order to try and realise its objectives. In other words, the problem was that this policy implied that it would require the role of a Labour government in order for it to be realised, but this perspective was increasingly problematical because of the increasing right-wing trajectory of the Labour party. In other words, the approach of ‘Socialism in Our Time’ implied the necessity of the militant action and mass movement of the workers if it was to be possibly realised. But the programme did not outline the importance of the democratic transformation of the trade unions is this development was to become credible and feasible. The point was that the objectives of the labour movement would have to be changed by the increasing influence of the role of militant struggle and the participation of the workers in this development. In other words, the ILP would have to challenge the political domination of reformism within the Labour movement. But this possibility was undermined by the ambiguous attitude of the ILP towards the Labour party. This meant the ILP did not challenge the supremacy of the Labour party within the working class in a consistent and principled manner. It still adhered to the illusion that it could being about the transformation of the role and character of the Labour party. But the ILP was also aware of the opportunist limitations of the Labour party, and so its approach was based on ambiguity and the ultimate failure to provide a convincing alternative. The ILP still hoped to transform the role and policies of the Labour party. Laybourn suggests that the ultimate result was the failure of the ‘Socialism in Our Time’ perspective. But this conclusion would suggest that ‘Socialism in Our Time’ was an inherently unrealistic approach. However, this assessment would imply that it was not realistically possible to advance the objectives of trying to establish the aims of socialism within the limitations of a liberal democratic system. However, surely the major problem was that the labour party had consistently adapted to the perspective of reformism and so as a result had marginalised the ILP and attempted to discredit its attempt to maintain a principled socialist perspective. The dilemma for the ILP was that it had become marginalised and ineffective within the Labour Party, but the possible alternative of expressing an independent political role might only contribute to the process of continued marginalisation of the ILP. In other words, by the late 1920’s the ILP had entered into a situation of political crisis and did not seem to be able to resolve this situation in a beneficial manner of being able to re-establish its political influence. Furthermore, the option of the possibility of closer relations with the communist party seemed to have been undermined by the increasingly Stalinist and bureaucratic character of this organisation. In this context the only possible alternative was to try and develop a distinctive and popular form of a principled conception of a strategy for the promotion of the struggle of the workers in order to facilitate the possibility of the realisation of socialism.

Laybourne summarises the development of the politics of the ILP between 1928-32: “Between 1928 and 1932, faced with the failures of both socialist gradualism and ‘Socialism in our Time’, the ILP moved slowly and almost prosaically towards its more ‘revolutionary position’, looking towards trade union action rather than parliamentary democracy, to create a socialist workers commonwealth. Consequently, the Labour party and the ILP were following different paths to secure socialism. Many ILP activists felt that parliamentary democracy prevented significant socialist change… and that more direct means of securing socialism should be pursued. The Labour party’s vision…was based upon the essentially progressive and liberal conceptions of winning broad support across all social classes for its gradualist moves towards the state control of industry. To the ILP, pure socialism was thus seen as incompatible with the British parliamentary democracy that the Labour party pursued.” (p99-100) However, the important problem was that on the one hand the ILP had increasingly been dominated by the Labour party and so had difficulty in being able to promote its own distinctive politics, but on the other hand to leave the Labour party would imply the acceptance of a marginalised situation and the undermining of the importance of the ILP. The Cook-Maxton manifesto argued in favour of a revival of the class struggle and increasing the role of the trade unions in the attempt to advance the interests of the working class. But the members of the ILP were not united in favour of this programme and so the differences over strategy continued to undermine the credibility of the ILP. In other words, the ILP could not convincingly establish a programme for the realisation of socialism and were also not able to define their relationship to the Labour party in systematic terms. Thus after 1928 the ILP was in a situation of increasing political crisis because of problems about the issue of strategy. In this context it was not surprising that the influence of the ILP within the Labour party continued to decline. This meant the strategy of trying to transform the Labour party into a genuine socialist organisation seemed to become increasingly problematical. In tis context it seemed to be the obligation of the ILP to try and concentrate on trying to create a genuine and effective revolutionary organisation. But instead of trying to realise this objective the ILP instead had the illusion that its formal influence within the Labour party could mean the advance of the aims of genuine socialism within this organisation. But most of the members of parliament who formally still had a connection with the ILP had actually become more committed supporters of the reformist objectives of the labour party. In other words, the influence of the Labour party seemed to have ended the importance of the ILP. In this context the ILP could only uphold its organisational integrity and political importance by asserting a distinct role and so transforming its present situation of subordination to the Labour party. There seemed to be a choice between asserting an independent and principled role for the ILP, or alternatively accepting the continuation of subordination to the Labour party. In this situation the ILP would seem to have an obligation to try and assert the interests of the working class and the aim of socialism in a direct manner by contemplating a role outside the Labour party. Or, at the very most, the ILP should have conducted an energetic struggle within the Labour party in order to promote the aims of a consistent and principled socialism. But the ILP failed to consistently struggle for socialism within the Labour party and instead became an ineffective critic of the Labour government of 1929. Indeed Maxton, one of the leaders of the ILP, failed to obtain majority support of other ILP members of parliament for his principled criticisms of the limitations of the government. The ILP was effectively in a situation of political crisis when it should have been an effective leadership in the opposition to the limitations of the Labour government. Ultimately this situation of disunity in the ILP was an expression of a failure to establish united support for a conception of a perspective for transition to socialism. Many of the ILP members of parliament supported the reformist approach of the Labour government. Ultimately what this situation indicated was the failure to unite around a credible programme of transition to socialism. The various perspectives of the ILP about the attainment of socialism were not supported by the very members of parliament who were formally adherents of the ILP. Ultimately the reformist approach of the Labour party was not effectively opposed by the majority of the ILP, and instead this organisation was effectively in a situation of serious political crisis. At the very moment that the ILP should have provided a principled alternative to the opportunism of the 1929 Labour government it failed to realise this possibility. Within the ILP Maxton failed to obtain the support of ILP members of parliament for his criticism of the various limitations of the 1929 Labour government. The differences within the parliamentary group of ILP members of parliament meant that the ILP was not in a position to respond effectively to the crisis of the 1929-31 Labour government. The ILP provided various criticisms of what it considered to be the limitations of this government, but it is questionable whether this approach represented a convincing expression of a genuine socialist perspective. Instead, the ILP had been reduced to being critics of the labour government but the development of a genuine alternative perspective for the realisation of socialism had not been established by this analysis of the limitations of the role of the Labour party in government. Instead, the ILP had been reduced to being critics who were increasingly unable to promote an effective conception of what was socialism and how to realise this objective.

Furthermore, the influence of the ILP within the Labour party was increasingly becoming less effective and the genuine group of ILP members of parliament had been reduced to five by 1931. The ILP increasingly became interested in studying alternative conceptions of the process of the realisation of socialism based on the mass struggle of the workers, but it was unable to actually establish an alternative perspective of change. The ILP held a special conference on the issue of disaffiliation in 1932 and decided to vote in favour. This seemed to be a very mistaken decision because George Lansbury became the leader of the Labour party after Macdonald’s decision to become prime minster of the National government and so the basis to revive socialist ideas within the Labour party seemed to have become promising. The ILP could have become an expression of the influence of socialism within a party that was discussing how to advance after the betrayal of Macdonald. The ILP could have outlined a conception of socialism that combined the role of participatory democracy of the producers with the role of parliament. But Laybourne suggests that the decision to leave the Labour party was a mistake: “What then was the reason for the disaffiliation of the ILP? Was it…reasoned thought that freed the ILP from the parliamentary allegiance and allowed it to follow its own socialist policies freed from compromise and gradualism?.......The ILP’s disaffiliation from the Labour party was clearly the culmination of its concern, since the introduction of the Labour party constitution of 1918, that it no longer had a distinct role to play in Labour politics ……… A considered decision or not, the fact is that it led the ILP to stop operating as a viable and meaningful political party and turned it into a diminishing political sect.” (p121) This conclusion would seem to be right because the ILP could not establish a credible alternative conception of a strategy for socialism outside the Labour party. The point is that the ILP had functioned as the most principled expression of the aims of socialism within the Labour party. The very defection of Macdonald to the Coalition government was an indication of the necessity for the ILP to continue its influence within the Labour party in order to uphold the importance of the aims of socialism. The ILP could have had an influence at the very moment that a left-wing leader such as Lansbury was established within the Labour party. It could be argued that there were no principled differences between Lansbury and the ILP and instead both were united in trying to uphold the aims of socialism in a more principled manner. Indeed, the ILP could have developed its influence within the Labour party by suggesting that the opportunism of Macdonald could only be opposed in a principled manner by the elaboration of a more convincing perspective for the realisation of socialism. The opportunism of Macdonald was because a form of opportunism had become to be conceived as more practical and feasible for the expression of political policies than the attempt to advance the aims of socialism. In this context the task of the ILP was to elaborate a conception of how the role of parliamentary democracy could become reconciled to the aim of generating the possibilities for socialism. The very importance of the ILP was that it was the most essential expression of ideas about how the aim of socialism could be developed and realised. Its conception of the increased participatory role of the workers in the organisation of the economy had to become connected to the aim of achieving a majority for the Labour party in Parliament. In other words, the most credible potential for making progress towards socialism was still connected to obtaining support within the Labour party for this objective. The very role of the ILP should have been to promote this type of perspective of change within the Labour party. This aspect was connected to the fact that the very opportunism and betrayal of Macdonald had meant that the members of the Labour party had become possibly receptive to accepting the radical approach of the ILP. But at the very moment of the necessity for the role of the ILP within the Labour party it supported the aim of disaffiliation in 1932. But this meant that the aim of the ILP to promote the aims of socialism within the Labour party had been ended by its own actions. This development seemed to be a mistake that could only contribute to the effective continued decline of the ILP. In other words, the ILP had been defined by its very involvement in the Labour party. Its political role was to generate the influence of a conception of socialism for the Labour party to support and attempt to implement. But instead, the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour party in 1932 in what seemed to be a mistaken decision that did not seem to recognise that this could mean the very end of the role of the ILP.

In other words, the hopes for the success of the ILP after its disaffiliation from the Labour party could not be realised. Laybourne comments: “Those who supported the disaffiliation of the ILP in 1932 hoped for a new dawn for socialism freed from the gradualist policies and the crabbing and confining influence of the Labour party. They envisioned a millennial age dawning as capitalism appeared to be collapsing in the wake of the Wall Street crash of 1929. Not surprisingly, those opposed to disaffiliation feared the decline and disintegration of the ILP. As events unfolded, it became clear that the ILP was failing. Instead of a new age dawning, the ILP descended into internecine conflict between reformists and Marxists, pro-Labour party groups anti-Labour party groups, and divided between prominent charismatic leaders, as it floundered between affiliation with communist, political independence and possible re-affiliation with the Labour party by the end of the 1930’s.” (p126) Indeed the decision for leaving the Labour party only resulted in splits within the ILP and its continued decline. This development only indicated that this decision was a mistake and that increasingly the only alternative seemed to be the development of relations with the Stalinist communist party. The ILP became concerned with possible unity with the Communist party when the real issue should have been to try and reverse the mistaken decision to leave the Labour party. The actual policy should have been to try and influence the Labour party in a favourable situation created by the leadership of Lansbury. The influence of left-wing intellectuals like GDH Cole within the Labour party indicated that genuine discussion was occurring about the character of socialism and how it could be realised. This was the very discussion that should have been taking place within the ILP, but instead it became preoccupied with the issue of relations with the Communist party, which meant that the important issue of Stalinism was not being tackled in a principled manner. In these circumstances the most appropriate perspective for the ILP to adopt would have been the attempt to reaffiliate to the Labour party. But instead of this possibility there was indecision within the ILP as it was divided on the issue of relations with either the Labour party or Communist party. Primarily the ILP could not establish a credible politics based on a conception of authentic socialism and instead it was an organisation characterised by indecision. What would seem to be the most logical would have been to attempt to re-establish political and organisational relations with the Labour party and so admit that the attempt to realise a distinctive political organisation had proved to be a failure. Indeed, many ILP members were spontaneously making this decision. The irony of this situation was that the Labour party was seriously engaged in discussion about the issues of socialism under the new leadership of Lansbury and then Clement Attlee. The ILP could have become an expression of a distinctive role within the development of analysis of the strategy of the Labour party. It could have outlined its conception of popular democracy based on workers management of the economy, but instead it was involved in what seemed to be futile discussions about the issue of relations with the Communist party. It was not sufficiently understood that the bureaucratic elitist character of the Communists meant that fusion with them would have been unprincipled for the ILP. Ultimately it was the attitude of the communists that meant the possibility of unification was not realised. What these developments indicated was that the ILP was unviable outside of the Labour party. It could only have a credible political role in terms of trying to re-establish relations with the Labour party. The dogmatism within the ILP seemed to be expressed by the fact that a considerable proportion of the members did not support Ethiopia (Abyssinia) in its conflict with Italy. The expression of a dogmatic pacifism seemed to have been more important than the issue of what seemed to be a principled defence of an oppressed nation in conflict with an imperialist power. This development could be considered to be the expression of a possible decline of the ILP into a political obscurity.

However, the Spanish civil war seemed to revive the ILP and establish the importance of a conception of participatory socialism of the working class. The role of the POUM and Anarchists in Spain indicated that the working class could develop a popular form of socialism in opposition to fascism and this potential was published by George Orwell, an ILP member in Spain. But this apparent credible and principled conception of a perspective to oppose fascism seemed to become problematical when connected to the issue of world war. The confusion of this issues led Maxton, an important leader in the ILP to praise Chamberlain and his appeasement policies. It did not seem possible to elaborate a perspective of how to conduct a genuine and popular struggle against fascism based on the genuine mobilisation of the working class to realise this objective, which would not mean support for the role of bourgeois democratic governments: “The problem for the ILP was how to reconcile its hatred of war and the pacifism of some of its members with an underlying opposition to fascism. It had been so divided over the Abyssinian crisis but was prepared to fight fascism in Spain and was now faced with a quandary of supporting action against war in a potential wider configuration. Brockway tried to square the circle in speaking to the Peace Pledge Union. Here he suggested that the ILP would oppose a war between the democratic states and the fascist states, and any activity by the League of Nations, but argued that the ILP is not pacifist for the transition from capitalism to socialism could not be made by the pacifist method. In other words, the ILP would resist war passively but also ‘prepare for the moment when the war could be ended by the overthrow of the capitalist and war-making governments across the frontiers’, something which suggested the need for a workers and socialist revolution against the capitalist system in general. Brockway’s speech was something of a compromise, reflecting the tensions between a pacifist parliamentary group and the wide support within the ILP to fight fascism, to defend Abyssinia, Czechoslovakia and the other oppressed countries. According to Brockway, it was clear that the ILP was not a pacifist party but it was committed to workers revolution rather than to an anti-fascist war.” (p167) But the problem was that this approach did not seem to be able to establish a credible perspective related to the actual invasion of much of Europe by the major fascist powers. In this context how would it be possible to develop a type of genuine struggle for national liberation that still adhered to the objectives of socialism and internationalism? Hence the ultimate perspectives of the ILP were not able to provide a conception of how a genuine anti-fascist struggle could be conducted that would not become the justification of bourgeois democracy and the aims of particular capitalist and imperialist powers. Nor did the ILP seem to be able to promote effective propaganda for socialism which could provide an alternative to the Labour party which had become an important part of the coalition government during the second world war. It seemed that the ILP had become a dogmatic and declining party that was essentially in decline by the late 1930’s. However, ultimately it could be suggested that the ILP was still relevant because it continued to uphold a conception of democratic socialism based on the principles of solidarity and internationalism. It also seemed to be superior to the sectarian limitations of the various Trotskyist groups and provided an alternative to the reformism of the Labour party. In this context the continued decline and effective demise of the ILP did not lead to a credible alternative. The ultimate relevance of the ILP was that it promoted what was possibly the most principled conception of socialism in terms of the role of the democracy of the producers and the participation of the people in the organisation of the economy. Hence any credible development of a contemporary socialist party would have to understand the aspects of the politics of the ILP. In an important sense the issue is to develop a new and contemporary version of the ILP. In other words, the aim is to establish a party that would promote an objective of socialism that is democratic and popular as was developed by the ILP in its period of peak importance. The aim would not be to establish a replica of the ILP but instead to utilise its merits in order to establish a credible socialist party in comparison to the general failures in this regard in the recent period.

The issue that has to be decided was the history of the ILP an expression of inevitable failure as it became inevitably superseded by what seemed to be the more practical and credible Labour party? But the point to be made is that the Labour party was ultimately committed to realising reforms within the limitations of the capitalist system whilst the ILP remained supportive of more radical measures that would enable a process of transition to an effective socialist system to be realised. Hence criticism of the ILP would imply that reformism was more credible than a radical approach concerning the issue of objectives. The constitution of the ILP adopted in 1922, is a useful and important summary of its aims which can be contrasted with the reformist practice of the Labour party. In this constitution it is suggested that the ILP is committed to achieving the aim of a socialist commonwealth which means: “The socialist commonwealth is the state of society in which land and capital are communally owned and the process of production, distribution and exchange are social functions.”(‘The Constitution of the Independent Labour party 1922’ In Laybourne p213) This perspective implies that the domination of capital over labour will be replaced by a cooperative system in which the economy is organised in terms of aims and objectives are established by the role of the workers in terms of their supremacy within the relations of production. This means the development of a political system of a national representative assembly based on the functioning of genuine democracy which will be connected to the connected to the expression of industrial democracy. Hence: “A central body of representatives of the people both as producers and consumers must decide the amount and character of both communal production and service necessary. The internal management of each industry must be in the hands of the workers, administrators, technical and manual, engaged therein, openly in conjunction with the representatives of organised consumers. Experience will determine the methods of co-operation and the detailed form of organisation, as step by step is taken towards the attainment of the socialist commonwealth.” (p213) But the immediate problem that this perspective has to address is the issue of how this aim will become the popular basis of the aspirations of the workers and of the people in general. Indeed, an important problem for the ILP is that the Labour party has interpreted these types of aims in terms of the reformist standpoint of gradual change and so seems to have questioned the ultimate importance of this very conception of a socialist transformation of society. Hence an important problem concerns how to obtain the support of the Labour party for this type of radical perspective? This issue is also connected to the ideological importance of the hegemony of capitalist objectives which means that the popularity of this aim of socialism is difficult to develop within the working class. Instead, what seems to be ideologically dominant is the influence of the viewpoint that the most that is possible is to make limited gains by the workers within the present capitalist system. However, the failure to address these important ideological issues means that the issue of the general acceptance of the domination of capitalism by most people is not tackled in a convincing manner. Instead, a dogmatic assumption is being made that the aims of capitalism will become challenged by the workers in connection to the role of a principled socialist party. However, this very party, which is the ILP, is being challenged by the more reformist role of the Labour party, which has become the dominant expression of the attitudes of the workers. Hence it is the Labour party which actually represents the primary basis for undermining the feasibility of the socialist alternative. It would seem that the reformist approach expressed by the Labour party has become more credible and practical than the ILP aim for socialism. However, it is this very important issue which is not being tackled by this constitution. Instead, it is being suggested that the workers will ultimately accept the principled character and feasibility of this programme for socialism. But it is the very political role of the Labour party which seems to suggest that there is an alternative perspective, which is that of trying to modify the capitalist system in favour of the workers. Hence the ILP has to conduct principled political struggle in order to develop majority support for its alternative revolutionary approach. But this issue of ideology is not being tackled in this programme. Instead, the aims of the programme are outlined in dogmatic terms without any reference to possible complications concerning their realisation.

This criticism is not meant to question the validity of the objectives outlined concerning a conception of the aspects and character of a proposed system of economic and political democracy. But what does not seem to be tackled is the issue of how the workers will realise this objective, and also how the opposition of the trade union and Labour party leaders concerning this perspective will be overcome. The point is that the ILP seems to have become increasingly marginalised because of the very fact that the reformist alternative of the Labour party seems to have become more popular and influential. In this context many of the formally ILP members of parliament ultimately have a loyalty to the parliamentary Labour party. Instead, the very problem is that this perspective does not attempt to address the important fact that the most important opposition to this programme of change is the very role of the Labour party and trade union leaders. Indeed, the ILP is marginalised by the very fact that the Labour party has adopted an explicit reformist approach based on increasing its influence in parliament by the adoption of a perspective of gradual change. Furthermore, the majority of the members of parliament formally associated with the ILP support this reformist perspective and so reject the aim of socialist transformation that the ILP leadership tries to uphold. It would seem that this unsatisfactory situation can only be resolved if the ILP conducts a process of ideological struggle against the effective reformist politics of the Labour party. Indeed, this approach would seem to be implicit in relation to the aims of the ILP when it contends: “The ILP declares that its immediate objectives are: (a)To disseminate as widely as possible its socialist principles. (b)To obtain control of national and local governing bodies, and to assist in extending their activities on socialist lines. (c)To co-ordinate and develop trade union organisation with a view to securing working class solidarity and obtaining control over industry. (d)To strengthen and extend the co-operative movement, with a view to participation in the administration of the socialist commonwealth.” (p213-214) This would seem to be a principled understanding of the aims of a participatory socialism based on the extension of the role of a genuine form of economic and political democracy. But the important issue of the ideological hegemony of the capitalist system is not being effectively tackled by the formulations being indicated. Primarily the issue of the opposition of the reformist Labour party concerning the attempt to realise this militant perspective is not tackled. Instead, it is assumed that the spontaneous dynamism of the workers will automatically generate increased support for the aim of the socialist transformation of society. These strategic limitations and problems have been characteristic of most revolutionary type organisations. The apparent confidence of the ILP that its socialist objectives will be realised means that the difficulties connected with this perspective are not addressed. However, it could also be suggested that the emphasis on the importance of trade union and working-class action is not made more precise. For example, how is the conservative role of the trade union bureaucracy to be overcome and replaced with the dynamism of mass action of the workers? Thus, we have a collection of strategic principles but the practical complexities involved in trying to realise the aims of programme do not seem to be indicated in convincing terms.

Thus, it is suggested in dogmatic terms that the dynamics of socialism can be realised if the following principles are adhered to: “In the transition from capitalism to socialism, the Independent Labour party will work for legislation and industrial changes which contribute to its final aim and will oppose those which tend to preserve the existing state of economic exploitation by capitalism. Any scheme This of nationalisation or municipalisation must: (a)give the workers in industry an effective share in and responsibility for its administration as defined above. (b)Tend to eliminate capitalism and prevent the creation of a new system of financial exploitation.” (p214) But the problem is that this understanding of the aims of socialism are being suggested in terms of a collection of imperatives that implies a dynamic of necessity in relation to their realisation. It is not being explained how the development of a relationship between the workers and the ILP can be created that would as a result generate the possibility of a process of radical change because of collective struggle. Instead, this approach is outlined in the apparently elitist terms of what the ILP could achieve within parliament and government. But this very perspective is problematical because the ILP is only a subordinated part of the Labour party which seems to be primarily influenced by the perspectives of limited reformist change rather than becoming the basis to promote a process of radical transformation to socialism.

However, the ILP would suggest that it is able to provide answers to these types of objections because it supports the following perspective of change: “The Independent Labour Party takes its part in the struggle of the workers to win freedom from economic tyranny imposed by the capitalist class and capitalist state. It holds that the best way of effecting a peaceful change to socialism is by the organisation of the workers politically to capture the power of the state and industry to take over the control and management of the industrial machine. The Independent Labour party recognises that circumstances may arise when government or the reactionary class might attempt to suppress liberty or thwart the national will. It holds that to defeat such an attempt democracy must use to the utmost extent its political and industrial powers.” (p214) This would seem to be a principled expression of the aim of the achievement of a socialist society by means of the mobilisation and participation of the workers in the realisation of this objective. But the problem is that this understanding is not connected to the elaboration of a perspective or strategy of change. Indeed, the opportunist limitation and problem of the Labour party is not addressed by this formulation. In other words, this proposed programme of action is not credible because of the failure to tackle the importance of the issue of the opportunist role of the Labour party. Instead, it is assumed in some vague and dogmatic manner that the workers will become automatic supporters of the objectives of the ILP. But despite these limitations the programme has outlined some important aspects of a possible programme of action in order to facilitate revolutionary change. However, the task that is posed is the necessity to obtain the support of the Labour party for the programme of the ILP. But the issue of the role of the Labour party is what is being primarily ignored by this programme. Nevertheless, despite these limitations the ILP has established its principled differences from the reformist gradualism of the Labour party. It has outlined the aims and objectives of a militant programme of popular change by the workers in relation to trying to achieve socialism. The programme also establishes a principled opposition to the role of imperialism and so outlines the necessity of internationalism in connection with the attempt to realise change. Hence despite limitations in this programme the ILP establishes its demarcation from the reformist character of the Labour party. But it could be argued that it fails to develop support for this alternative approach in a convincing manner, and instead the ILP remains merely a critic of the role of the Labour party.

However, despite these limitations the ILP has established a principled perspective of change which is summarised in the following manner: “The Independent Labour party takes its part in the struggle of the workers to win freedom from economic tyranny imposed by the capitalist class and capitalist state. It holds that the best way of effecting a peaceful change to socialism is by the organisation of the workers politically to capture the power of the state and industry to take over the control and management of the industrial machine. The Independent Labour party recognises that circumstances may arise when a government or reactionary class might attempt to suppress liberty or thwart the national will. It holds that to defeat such an attempt democracy must use to the utmost its political and industrial powers.” (p214) This perspective implies the necessity of the role of the ILP in the development of the mass mobilisation of the workers in order to establish radical change that will generate the possibility to realise socialism. However, in order to make this perspective genuinely credible would mean that it has to be elaborated in terms of an understanding of how the mobilisation of the workers in favour of change can be most effectively expressed and developed. Nevertheless, the ILP has established the principles of a programme of mass struggle if socialism is to be realised.

The ultimate problem of the ILP was that it did not establish an effective relationship to the Labour party. It created the Labour party, but this organisation acquired an autonomy from the ILP which enabled it to undermine the importance and influence of this organisation. The Labour party was essentially in competition with the ILP, and it became more important and so was able to replace the influence of this party. It could be argued that the ILP had a strategy of change and various policies that made it distinctive from the Labour party, but the problem was that it did not advocate this approach in convincing terms. For example, it did not promote the aim of industrial democracy in a convincing manner that would actually result in the generation of mass struggles by the workers in order to achieve these aims. Instead, it advocated the aim of socialism in an unconvincing manner and this meant that it had no credible alternative to the reformist strategy of the Labour party. The ILP was neither reformist nor revolutionary but was instead a classic expression of the approach of centrism. This political standpoint meant that it was a justification of ambiguity about how to achieve the aim of socialism. In contrast the Labour party was adamant that it was aiming to introduce reforms within the political system, and so was more realistic and practical than the ILP. Furthermore, the majority of the members of parliament associated with the ILP effectively become genuine supporters of the role of the Labour party. This meant that it seemed the marginalised situation of the ILP indicated the lack of credibility of its strategy of socialist change. In vague terms the ILP was in favour of the mobilisation of the workers in order to realise socialism, but this approach was never convincingly outlined in strategic terms. Instead, the Labour party seemed to be expressing a more credible approach concerning change in terms of the gradual perspective that the introduction of reforms would ultimately realise the aim of socialism. In contrast the ILP did not establish how the mobilisation of the workers in support of industrial democracy would realise socialism. However, the strength of the ILP was that its approach meant that it did not accept the domination of capitalism, in contrast to the opportunist role of the Labour party. Hence it had a principled position of supporting the aim of peace during world-war one. It also supported the industrial struggles of the workers and was a genuine advocate of change by the role of the 1926 general strike. Hence the ILP could be defined as principled when contrasted to the opportunism of the Labour party. But ultimately the ILP was essentially nothing more than the conscience of the Labour party. It was an organisation of moral protest rather than being the expression of the perspective of the aspiration to realise socialism. Ultimately the problem was that the Labour party defined its politics in a manner that was based on a disregard for the opinions of the ILP. It was the role of the Labour party that seemed to make the ILP superfluous. In this situation it seemed that the Communist party had become the expression of the role of revolutionary politics in a more credible manner. But unlike the authoritarian character of the communist party the ILP was a genuine expression of the aim of democratic socialism. Hence the ILP represented an authentic alternative to the opportunism and reformism of the Labour party and the bureaucratic elitism of the Communist party. Therefore, despite its marginalisation it could be argued that the ILP had a relevant basis for its political role as the expression of a genuine advocacy of a form of democratic socialism. The ILP suggested that the mass struggles of the workers could realise a type of participatory and emancipatory socialism. Indeed the 1926 general strike seemed to express the credible character of this perspective. However, the defeat of the strike meant that the prospects for left wing change seemed to be expressed by the reformist approach of the Labour party and the attempt to achieve a Labour government in parliamentary terms. In other words, it was the development of what seemed to be an adverse balance of class forces that resulted in the increased influence of a reformist approach as it seemed that the militant struggles of the workers had been unsuccessful. The essentially industrial perspective of change by the role of the industrial activity of the workers that had been advocated by the ILP seemed to have become a failure. This problematical issue was connected to the fact that the ILP ultimately did not have an approach that could facilitate its influence within the Labour party given that the ILP members of this organisation increasingly left the ILP and instead became exclusively part of the Labour party. This process happened in terms of the role of the Labour parliament and in general terms. The ILP had entered into a generalised political crisis by which it responded by the mistaken approach of disaffiliation from the Labour party. This only increased the marginalisation of the ILP and confirmed it as an insignificant organisation. Ironically the election of George Lansbury as leader of the Labour party to replace the discredited Ramsey Macdonald could have resulted in the revival of the ILP if it had remained in this organisation. Indeed, the ILP could have become the major expression of political advice to Lansbury. Indeed, in this manner its strategy of combining the importance of the struggle of the workers with the development of electoral success could have acquired genuine credibility. But instead of this development the ILP only became marginalised and apparently discredited.

Outside of the Labour party the ILP could only consider the issue of merging with the Stalinist communist party as the expression of possible progress. But this meant that the ILP became associated with the politics of authoritarian socialism. This meant its advocacy of a left-wing form of democratic socialism became undermined. However, the Spanish civil war, which indicated the authoritarian role of Stalinism, led the ILP to attempt to consider developing relations with left wing anti-Stalinist forces. But such a possibility could not undermine what seemed to have become a process of inexorable decline. The only manner in which this marginalisation could have been overcome would have been by attempting to re-establish political and organisational relations with the Labour party. But this was what the ILP seemed reluctant to consider. Instead, the ILP was only made dynamic by the role of the various Trotskyist forces within its organisation. But when these groupings left to join the Labour party the decline of the ILP become inevitable. By 1938 it had become a defunct organisation. This development was a serious setback because the ILP had been the most effective promoter of the aims of democratic socialism based on a perspective of class struggle politics. The alternative of the communist party was compromised by its association with Stalinism and the various Trotskyist groups were not able to overcome the problem of marginalisation and the inability to create a unified and effective organisation. But the relevance of the ILP was shown by the fact that it remained throughout its history the most effective promoter of a popular type of socialism which was the only principled alternative to the reformism and opportunism of the Labour party. However, the ILP was seriously undermined by the effective disloyalty of the Labour MP’s that were associated with the ILP. The strategy of the ILP for the development of the success of the struggles of the workers in order to create the conditions for revolutionary change remained a credible conception of transition to socialism. But the problem was that the ambiguity of the relation of the ILP to the Labour party meant that it could not establish the practical credibility of its strategy in terms of a genuine expression of the principles of mass struggle that was not undermined by the apparently contrasting imperatives of the importance of the role of parliamentary democracy. The apparent failure to resolve this issue in terms of the development of an effective attempt to obtain greater support within the Labour party for this perspective meant that the ILP seemed to have a conception of change that was not realistic. In this situation it seemed that the reformist approach of the Labour party was more practical and feasible. Indeed, the approach of the ILP seemed to be a propagandistic perspective that was inferior to the perspective of the Labour party. The very developments in the class struggle, like the 1926 general strike would seem to provide the possible credibility of the strategy of the ILP but the problem was that the very aspect of the role of the ILP within the Labour party meant that its strategy seemed to be undermined by the importance of this connection. Furthermore, the defeat of the 1926 general strike seemed to be a serious undermining of the credibility of the strategy of the ILP. The very adverse developments in the class struggle seemed to express the lack of feasibility of the strategy of the ILP. But the ultimate problem was the decision to leave the Labour party which only confirmed the marginalisation of the ILP in the context of a decline of the role of the class struggle. The ILP could not recover its influence given this serious error. Its ultimate demise seemed to become inevitable.

It could be suggested that the ILP had no other principled choice given the increasing right-wing character of the role of the Labour party. But the point is that it should have been necessary for them to oppose the increasingly opportunist trajectory of the Labour party by conducting a process of political struggle for socialism within this organisation. Indeed, this very struggle should have been the basis to increase the influence and popularity of the ILP. But instead, they decided to leave the Labour party at the very moment when ILP was needed in order to oppose the increasing opportunism of this organisation. Indeed, this very struggle should have been the basis to develop the importance of the ILP within the Labour party, and so in this manner attempt to realise genuine progress for the aims of socialism. But instead of this possible development the ILP preferred sectarian isolation in the name of political principles. This meant that the only alternative became the issue of relations with the increasingly Stalinist character of the communist party. But this prospect of alliance with the Communist party was never likely to occur because Stalinism contradicted the aspect of adherence to democratic socialism by the ILP. The result of these developments was that the ILP was reduced to a situation of sectarian isolation, and so this meant its ultimate demise was inevitable. But this development could have been avoided if the ILP had considered that it had an opportunity to promote the left-wing transformation of the Labour party after Macdonald’s decision to form a national government. Indeed, people like GDH Cole, who effectively remained with the Labour party, could have become an intellectual inspiration for the ILP with his perspective of guild socialism and workers management of the economy. But instead of these possible progressive alliances, the ILP had to tackle the issue of a possible merger with the Stalinist communist party. Only the implications of the Spanish civil war prevented this opportunist fusion occurring. But by the later 1930’s the ILP seem essentially marginalised and an irrelevant force in British politics. Its conception of democratic socialism did not seem to be able to meet the challenges of the necessity to oppose fascism and of providing a valid conception of democratic socialism. Instead, it seemed that the ILP had become an irrelevant political force, and that the attempt to provide an alternative to that of the Labour party could be considered to be a failure. The ILP still continued to function, but its apparent credibility seemed to have been ended by the late 1930’s. Furthermore, the Labour party seemed to regain its importance with its significant role in Churchill’s coalition government during world-war two. Then the credible reformist role of the Labour government of 1945-51 seemed to suggest that reformism was more practical and realistic than the apparently vague conception of the democratic socialism that had been advocated by the ILP. Indeed, by this time the ILP seemed to ceased functioning in any meaningful manner. Instead, effective forms of socialism seemed to have been expressed by the role of the left wing of the Labour party, and this situation seemed to have been expressed by the next sixty years and culminated in the Corbyn leadership of the Labour party. But with the end of the Corbyn era and the renewal of right-wing domination of the Labour party it is possible to consider that the experience of the ILP has become relevant in the present period, as we will attempt to indicate.

In the various policy and programmatic documents of the ILP between 1922-28 it outlined a convincing conception of democratic socialism based on the realisation of a system of economic democracy of the producers and making parliament genuinely accountable to the aspirations of the people. It was suggested that the working class would have to collectively act in order to realise this type of socialist society and so the role of the labour movement should be to generate the possibilities to realise these types of objectives. Hence the aim of principled socialists should be to encourage the development of the collective power of the people as the basis for defining the character of the economy, and so in that manner achieving the transformation of capitalism into socialism. This meant the aim of the Labour movement should be to encourage the mass struggles of the workers in order to achieve these emancipatory objectives. But the problem with this perspective was that the dominant influence of the Labour party would undermine the development of popular support for this perspective and instead would attempt to uphold a conception of reformist change via the role of parliament. Therefore, the ILP had to develop a consistent and principled approach towards the Labour party which would be based on trying to develop the support of this organisation for a process of radical change. But instead, the ILP tended to ignore the importance of the Labour party, especially after it ended its political relations with this organisation in 1932. The ultimate mistake of the ILP was to reject the continued necessity to try and influence the Labour party concerning the adoption of genuine socialist objectives. The ultimate result of this development was that the ILP contributed to its own obscurity and marginalisation. It became essentially a propaganda expression of the aims of socialism. However even in this isolated situation the ILP was still able to contribute the promotion of the aims of a democratic and participatory socialism. The increasingly right-wing development of the Labour party indicated the importance of the role of the ILP. However, the ILP was unable to develop support for its principled alternative of participatory socialism and ultimate it was essentially defunct by the end of the 1930’s.

But the very history of the Labour party indicated the necessity of the role of the ILP during the 1930’s and 1940’s. The Labour party became an important part of the collation government of Churchill, and it then formed what was a reformist administration in 1945. In this period an effective and popular ILP could have continued to outline an alternative of genuine socialism. It could have outlined a perspective of the administration of the economy by the workers and established the necessity to define an approach towards the second world war based on the aim of forming a revolutionary government in order to conduct a principled struggle against fascism. The effective demise of the ILP meant that the Labour party became hegemonic within the working class in an uncontested manner, and this meant the politics of reformism became uncontested. In other words, the demise of the ILP meant that the influence of a popular and principled form of socialism was ended. Hence it is the task in the present to try and revive the importance of the aims upheld by the ILP. Instead, the various left- wing parties have been engaged in forms of activism and so have tended to deny the necessity to promote the aims of a democratic socialism similar to the approach of the ILP. Therefore, developing an understanding of the history of the ILP will enable us to develop greater knowledge of the aims of a democratic form of socialism. We can strive to achieve the influence of this perspective within the Labour party and in greater terms. Possibly the most important aspect of this approach would be to show that the role of genuine industrial democracy is the basis to create an alternative socialist economy and society. This means that we have to attempt to develop support within the people for this approach. In this context we can attempt to indicate how the perspectives of the ILP are still valid in the present period. It will be argued that this conception of genuine democracy of the producers in order to organise an economy is unrealistic and that there is no alternative to the continuation of capitalism in terms of the domination of the capitalist class. But this is a system of exploitation and inequality and so is not a progressive expression of the possibilities expressed by economic activity. Instead, the aims of the ILP are still relevant given the very continuation of the limitations of the capitalist system. But it could be argued that the very activist character of the politics of most of the let wing groups has meant that they have not argued in an effective manner for a socialist alternative. Therefore, we can still learn from the politics and experience of the ILP what is meant by a principled and credible programme of socialism. However, it could be argued that the very problem of the activism of the left-wing groups has led to the failure to establish a credible programme concerning the objective of socialism. It is necessary to learn from the history of the ILP what can constitute a conception of the socialist alternative. This theoretical inspiration of the ILP could still contribute to a development of our contemporary understanding of what can express an alternative to capitalism.

However, it could be argued that the failure of the ILP means that we should not attempt to repeat aspects of its programme and experience. But the point is that the ILP was not undermined because its approach was inherently limited and flawed. Instead, its aim of democratic socialism based on the economic and political participation of the people in the organisation of society remained essentially unchallenged and so retained a credible character. However, the ILP became marginalised and ineffective because of the greater importance of the role of the Labour party and the leadership of the trade unions. Furthermore, the limitations of the Labour party continued to indicate the relevance of the alternative approach of the genuine socialism of the ILP. If the ILP had been able to continue to function in an effective manner it could have become an important alternative to the increasingly reformist and opportunist limitations of the Labour party. It could have argued in 1945 that the welfare state established by the Labour government become the basis to create a genuinely socialist type of society. Instead, the effective demise of the ILP meant that the principled opposition to the Labour government was limited to the role of increasingly bureaucratic and elitist organisations, whether that be the communist party or a variety of Trotskyist groups. Ironically the situation after 1945 indicated the necessity of the ILP in order to establish how the reformism and opportunism of the Labour government was not a genuine alternative to the aim of democratic socialism that had been upheld by the ILP. It had been the ILP which had outlined in concise terms the conception of a democratic socialism based on the economic and political democracy of the people. But the marginalisation of the ILP in the 1930’s undermined the possibility to realise this perspective. It is important to note that the conception of socialism promoted by the ILP was never discredited, but instead this approach seemed to become irrelevant because of the increasingly marginalisation and insignificance of this organisation. Hence the ILP became a party of romantics like George Orwell and the ultimate result of this development was its continual decline in the 1930’s. Tragically the standpoint of principled politics seemed to be upheld by the bureaucratic socialism of the Communist party, and so the workers considered that they had no alternative than to support the reformist Labour party. But the very history of the Labour party indicates that the democratic socialism of the ILP is still relevant and so it is necessary to revive interest in their views concerning the possibility of a genuine participatory democracy in economic and political terms. However, the very activism of the left-wing groups means that the approach of the ILP is not being revived and instead what seems to have become influential is the perspective of activism that is based on a vague conception of the aims of socialism. Therefore, it would seem to be important to develop interest in the various policy documents of the ILP between 1914-38 and show how they could be relevant to the creation of a perspective for socialism in the present. In these terms the history of the ILP could be shown to have continued importance in relation to the task of promoting the possibility to overcome the domination of capitalism and instead establish the alternative of socialism.