

# Encyclopedia of Anti-Revisionism On-Line

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## Obituary: Reg Birch

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**Issued:** The Independent , June 17<sup>th</sup> 1994

Transcription, Editing and Markup: Paul Saba and Sam Richards

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*Reginald Birch, trade unionist and political activist: born London 7 June 1914; divisional organiser, AEU 1960-66; member, Executive Council AUEW 1966-79; Chairman, Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) 1968-94; member, TUC General Council 1975-79; member, Energy Commission 1977-79; died 1 June 1994.*

Reg Birch was a pint-sized revolutionary but never a 'red under the bed'. He was a trouble-making, extreme left-wing intellectual trade-union leader and proud of it, rising to fame but no glory in the Sixties and Seventies when industrial unrest was fashionable. He was a former Communist who became the first and last Maoist member of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress. In a world where genuine characters are a fast-dwindling breed, the former engineering union national officer Birch will be remembered with affection and a smile from everyone who encountered him.

Birch was an extraordinary, slightly built little man, with a wounding sense of humour and an outstanding ability to talk in riddles, particularly when sober. Only he seemed to know what he was talking about, but this minor detail did not deter the avid listener. Whenever trade-union leaders gather, stories about Birch abound, and now that he has gone those yarns will no doubt be stretched beyond credulity. Fortunately for the raconteur, however, the truth about Birch is so interesting that fiction and embellishment are superfluous.

On a visit to Shanghai in 1979, the year Birch retired, a Chinese building worker asked me: 'Do you know Reg Birch of the engineering union in England? We are told he is your next Prime Minister after your revolution.' Had this anecdote been told by anyone else I simply would not have believed it.

Birch was one of the most enigmatic trade-union leaders of his generation and because of his extreme left views he was never going to be hailed as one of the greatest union chiefs to grace the British labour movement. He embarrassed the Left of the labour movement as well as the Left of his own union, making even the Marxist engineering union president Hugh Scanlon - a former media bogeyman - appear right-wing.

Birch was a key figure in many of the main industrial disputes 20 years ago but never sought the headlines himself as he was not the union's President. Scanlon was paid to take the flak and the few

interviews Birch gave were deliberately incomprehensible as well as, one suspects, deliberately incoherent. For example, after crisis talks with British Leyland management he said live on television that he had concluded satisfactory talks with the 'curator of the British Museum'. When I had the audacity to point out that his statement conflicted with the facts and that he was being unnecessarily offensive he replied: 'I am never rude unintentionally.'

For a revolutionary he was remarkably quiet and shy but admitted that he looked forward to the revolution, which he said would be 'ugly, protracted and bloody'. He disliked democracy which involved the use of ballot-boxes, saying it made workers 'lazy'.

Employers said they liked him and appeared to enjoy his company. The former British Leyland industrial relations chief Sir Pat Lowry said Birch was one of the most unusual but effective trade-union leaders he had encountered. He figured in key disputes in the car industry, particularly the long Ford strike in 1971, airport maintenance strikes and Fleet Street strikes which shut the press on a regular basis. Newspaper shutdowns kept him amused because he could meet the journalists knowing they could not write a word. His attempts, backed by the hard Left of his union, to win the union's presidency always failed miserably, but he loved the thrill of the chase. Because of his pro-Chinese sympathies he was expelled from the Communist Party but he sorted out that problem by starting his own party called the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist). At its inception, in 1968, he addressed around 75 members and at his party's peak in the Seventies observers reckoned he could hold his annual general meeting in a telephone kiosk at Clapham Common.

The son of a builder, Reginald Birch was one of five children and was raised in Kilburn, north-west London. His father, 'who worked for posh artists', died when he was 14. His father had persuaded him to study English literature and it was this background which gave him the poetic turn of phrase and the mastery of the grand riposte. He attended a local elementary school, St Augustine's, leaving to become an apprentice toolmaker in 1929. By 1938, influenced by events in Manchuria and Spain, he became a Communist and conducted many collections for the victims of the Fascist regime in Spain.

During his working life as a toolmaker with a variety of north London firms he became active in the Amalgamated Engineering Union (now AEEU) and worked feverishly for every noble cause. His powers of oratory ensured that he became a natural leader, however small in stature. Like many militants of that era he found himself regularly out of work and blacklisted by employers. He was even jailed at the Old Bailey for organising a strike during the war and, after yet another dismissal, thousands of factory workers demonstrated for his reinstatement. In 1956 he joined the Communist Party's national executive and four years later his activism guaranteed his election to the union's powerful post of north London division organiser. He was elected to the AEU's national executive in 1966.

His first of many unsuccessful assaults on the presidency of his union was against the Catholic moderate Sir William Carron and he gradually drifted away from his Communist allegiance on the grounds that the party was little more than a 'bunch of social democrats'. He never disguised his affection for the Chinese brand of socialism and made frequent visits to Peking and Tirana, the Albanian capital, where he spent many a happy holiday en route to China.

Falling out with the Communists back home was not a career-enhancing move and he was expelled around 1966. This proved a fatal blow to his union aspirations. When Carron retired, the Communist old guard snubbed him and chose Hugh Scanlon, who had quit the Communist Party years earlier over the Hungarian invasion. The Communists, however, utilised Birch's talents to the full and could always be sure of his turning unofficial wildcat action into official action.

In 1975 he was elected to the TUC's ruling body, the General Council, an event which excited the media because of his political leanings. Birch's reaction: 'Oh Jesus, what an effing bore.' He soon handed a colleague a postage stamp and said: 'On the back of that I have written the names of all the TUC general secretaries who impress me.'

In his spare time he enjoyed classical music, swimming and growing herbs and ran a small bookshop, specialising in Chinese books and left-wing ideology. He said of himself: 'I have been called a Trotskyite, a Leninist and every bleeding name you can think of, mate, but I am just a bloody worker.'

No obituary of Reg Birch would be complete without a true story which has now passed into trade-union folklore.

During Ford pay talks the employers offered only one concession: improved death benefits but no improvement on wages. After a while Birch started tapping slowly on the table and began moaning quietly. A concerned Ford executive said: 'Mr Birch, whatever is the matter? Are you all right?' Birch ignored him and continued wailing, this time more loudly, Birch suddenly shouted: 'Is anybody there? Is anybody there?' By now the Ford boss was becoming exasperated and said: 'Really, Mr Birch, have you taken leave of your senses?' Birch replied: 'I am in touch with my dead members on the other side. They want to know if your kind offer is retrospective.'