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Shapurji Saklatvala and the Fight against Racism and Imperialism 1921-28

Shapurji Saklatvala was elected the Labour MP for Battersea North at the General Election in 1922. He lost his seat a year later, but was re-elected, this time as a communist, at the December 1923 election. He represented the South London constituency for five years until defeated by a Labour candidate in 1929. Saklatvala was one of only four communists ever to be elected to the House of Commons. He was also distinctive in being Labour's first non white MP.

The period of his active political life, stretching from 1916 to 1936, covers a momentous era in socialist politics. Inspired by the Russian revolution, like so many others in the Labour movement, he moved sharply to the left. Although not a foundation member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, he joined the party from the Independent Labour Party in 1921. This was a few months after the ILP's Annual Conference had rejected a move to affiliate to the Communist International. He remained a loyal and active member of the CPGB until his death in 1936.

His activity in the party as both a grass roots activist, an MP, and also as a member of the Central Committee, covered the first formative years of British communism. Saklatvala's life, covering as it does a testing period for revolutionary socialists, can give an insight into how communists, over half a century ago, tackled the still hotly contested issues of race, and the struggle against imperialism.

Saklatvala's conversion to socialism came about as a direct result of his opposition to colonialism. He settled in Britain from India in 1905 at the age of 30. He had already experienced at first hand the injustices of the colonial system, and the racism that was its necessary bedfellow. He left India, in part, because of his brushes with the British authorities. But when he arrived in England he was far from being a socialist. The wealthy Tata family, to which he was

related, like many others in the Indian upper class, were Gladstonian liberals. On his arrival in London he stayed at the National Liberal Club, where his family had enrolled him as a life long member. It was Saklatvala's contact, over the next few years, with British socialists, that lead to his conversion. In 1909, at Manchester, where he was working as a departmental manager for Tata's, he joined the Independent Labour Party. From then onwards Saklatvala was to spend much of his time in pursuit of his two main concerns -- socialism and anti colonialism. Although his socialist ideas, under the impact of the Russian Revolution, underwent a radical transformation, his approach to colonial freedom remained consistent. That is he constantly sought to build a united front between the workers of Britain and the forces for liberation in the colonies.

This approach can be seen in one of the first Labour movement organisations to concern itself with anti-imperialism, the Workers Welfare League of India. The league was established by Saklatvala in 1917. The aim of the League was to, "enlist the sympathy and help of British workers on behalf of labour in India independently of all political movements". The need for a united front of British and Indian workers was expressed in a statement of principles, issued by the League in 1919. The statement was signed by Saklatvala and a number of Trade Union leaders, including Arthur Pugh from the Iron and Steel Trades Federation. It stressed that, "the Indian labour problem is to be recognised as an English problem, seriously affecting the question of maintenance of standards of life among the workers working competitively in the same industries within the Empire".

The League's united front perspective also effected its organisation. Its objective was, "to bring together representatives of the working classes in Great Britain and India in order that they may be of mutual aid to each other".

To this end the League had separate British and Indian Committees. However, no proposal was considered final until passed by the General Committee which was composed of members from both Britain and India. The idea of this was that, "measures of reform may be proposed and adopted free from prejudice and one sidedness". Saklatvala was the first secretary of the League's Indian Committee, while Arthur Field, who lived in Battersea, was the General Secretary. Another Battersea man, Duncan Carmichael, later to be both a Battersea Labour councillor, and the Secretary of

the London Trades Council, was also strongly associated with the League. Alongwith Saklatvala he submitted a number of proposals on behalf of the League to a House of Commons Select Committee on Indian Reforms in 1919. In the preable to the report, entitled `the Empire Labour' the League claimed to be, "the only body that combines in it the actual knowledge of Indian economic conditions with practical experience of the working of the British Labour organisations in this country".

The League, from its earliest days established a base in the British Labour movement. A number of national Trade Unions were affiliated to it, as were numerous trade union branches. For many years, until 1928, the League was the All India Trade Union Congress' representative in Britain. Saklatvala on the League's behalf, spoke at a number of TUC Congresses. Something of the grassroots support enjoyed by the League can be gauged by a report of a conference held by the League in Wales in 1928. There were 148 delegates present, of which 33 were from miners lodges, 25 from womens co-op guilds, and 20 from Trades Councils and Labour Party's.

At a time when support for colonialism was strong, even amongst organised sections of the working class, the Workers Welfare League of India, strongly influenced by Saklatvala's united front approach, made some headway in breaking down barriers between the British and Indian Labour movements.

It was this same strategy of uniting the working class movements in the imperialist countries, with the national liberation movements in the colonies, that was to inspire the formation of the League Against Imperialism. Although the League was not only solely with British colonialism Saklatvala was to play a prominent role. Formed in 1927, the League drew together many of the national liberation movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries. At its founding Congress in Brussels in February 1927, there were 175 delegates from 37 countries. The organisations represented included, the National Revolutionary Army of China, the Chinese Trade Union Congress, the Kuomintang, the Indian National Congress, the Egyptian Nationalist Party, the South African Trade Union Congress, the Nationalist movement of Indonesia, and the African Committee for the defence of the Negro race. In addition, there were delegates from the Labour movements of the imperialist countries. Britain was represented by a delegation consisting of Labour and Communist Party stalwarts.

These included Harry Pollitt, Arthur McManus, Helen Crawford, Fenner Brockway, S.O.Davies, and George Lansbury. Saklatvala, who was visiting India at the time of the Congress, was not present, but he was elected to the League's Executive Committee later in the year.

Like the Workers Welfare League before it, the League against Imperialism attempted to raise the issue of colonialism within the Labour movement. Although the onset of the new line by 1929, make Labour Communist unity within the League difficult, particularly at national level, this did not deny that in the early days the League made a serious attempt to influence the thinking of Britain's organised working class.

At the League's first National Conference in Britain in July 1928, there were 343 delegates representing over 50 trade unions and 12 co-operative guilds. Later in the year the League, in a gesture of international solidarity, decided to support the boycott of the Simon Commission by the Indian National Congress. The Simon Commission was a committee of enquiry which was to go to India to investigate conditions. The League organised a number of public events exposing the Commission, and arguing the Congress's case. A very successful meeting took place in Limehouse in east London. Limehouse was the Labour leader Clement Atlee's constituency. Atlee had been appointed to the commission and despite protests had declined to withdraw. Saklatvala spoke at the meeting, and so did representatives of the Indian National Congress. It was a practical example of the kind of joint activity and mutual assistance between Britain and India, that Saklatvala had spent his life in trying to build.

Saklatvala was a committed supporter of the League. His commitment led to his arrest and brief interment at Ostend, while journeying to the League's Cologne Conference in 1929. He, along with the Labour MP James Maxton, the Reginald Bridgeman, were apprehended on the grounds that, their papers were not in order. After protests they were later released and allowed to continue their journey. The incident illustrates the inadequacies of the intelligence services operating at the time. Not only did the Belgium authorities, presumably acting at the behest of their British counterparts, think that the League Conference was taking place in Belgium, they also thought that both Maxton and Bridgeman were also Communist MPs. Even the 'Daily Chronicle' could not resist the headline. 'Someone blunders in Belgium'. The paper pointed out that

Bridgeman was in fact not a Communist MP, but the Labour candidate for Uxbridge.

At the 6th Congress of the Communist International in July 1928 there was an attempt to wind up the League which was defeated. Some months before Saklatvala had reiterated his own support for the organisation. Addressing the League's Executive Committee he said, "the League was something definite in the minds of the coloured peoples. Their hopes in it had been aroused and it would be wrong to disappoint them." Even during the height of the class struggle against class period Saklatvala still maintained his commitment to a united anti-colonial alliance. He wanted the League to be, "a broad organisation in which there is and must be room for all sincere anti-imperialist fighters without regard to their party affiliation, but that it is an indispensable condition of membership that the struggle against imperialism shall really be carried on actively and uncompromisingly".

In the field of national and international politics Saklatvala was committed to the forging of links between the organised Labour movement in Britain and the forces of national liberation in the colonies. He was also concerned with the exposure of colonialism to wider audience. As an MP he was in an ideal position to achieve both these objectives. he made a widely publicised visit to India in 1927 which succeeded in satisfying these twin aims. His stay in India lasted three months and was so successful that on his return the British Government denied him any future access to the country of his birth. It was a decision that was upheld even by the 1929-31 Labour Government. During the visit he was given the freedom of a number of Indian cities, and granted an official welcome by the Madras and Calcutta City authorities. He met and entered into a dialogue with Gandhi, about the future direction of the national movement in India. In addition, in the cities and towns that he visited he made contact with the nascent communist groups that had recently been established. The Communist Party considered the tour a great success and it was referred to at the CPGB's 9th Congress in October 1927.

"Saklatvala toured India on behalf of the party during the first months of 1927 getting a magnificent reception everywhere, and advocating in particular that the national movement should adopt a programme of demands for the workers and peasants. His controversy with M.K.Gandhi over the question of an independent

class organisation for the workers received wide publicity. His visit undoubtedly did much to stimulate the movement for an All India Workers and Peasants Party, a highly important field of activity for Indian Communists. No doubt it was owing to this that the Indian government has now cancelled comrade Saklatvala's right to return to his native land".

While in India Saklatvala met Phil Spratt and George Allison, both members of the CPGB who had been sent by the party to work under cover, and to help organise the Indian Trade Union movement. Soon after Saklatvala's visit Allison was deported back to England. In 1928 he was replaced by Ben Bradley, who continued with the organising work within the Indian labour movement. Two years after the visit Bradley, Spratt and thirty one other active trade unionists were arrested. They were tried at Meerut in front of an English civil servant, and after four years deliberation, the prisoners were given sentences of between three years, and transportation for life. The Meerut Conspiracy Trial received wide publicity, and because of the indignation it aroused, the sentences were later reduced, and some of the prisoners released. When Ben Bradley, whose ten year sentence was commuted, returned to England in 1933, he was met at Victoria Station by Saklatvala on behalf of the CPGB. That the trial was necessary at all is in part due to the work of Saklatvala, and the CPGB, in helping develop the Indian Labour movement.

Saklatvala's anti-imperialist activity also highlights the difference in approach between the Communist International and the Communist Party of Great Britain, towards the forces for national liberation. Under the influence of M.N.Roy, the Communist International adopted a far less conciliatory approach to the national bourgeoisie in the colonies than the British party. There was a profound animosity between Roy and Saklatvala. They fundamentally disagreed over anti-imperialist strategy, and in this struggle Roy was supported by the CI, and Saklatvala by the CPGB. These differences between Roy and his wife Evelyn, and Saklatvala, were particularly marked over their respective assessments of Gandhi. Roy in his 'Memoirs' makes clear his early opposition to Gandhi as a reactionary. It was a view shared by Evelyn Roy, who was a powerful influence in the CI in her own right. Writing for 'Labour Monthly' in 1923, she declared that in the struggle for national liberation, "Mr Gandhi definitely allied himself on the side of the bourgeoisie in the development of the Indian Revolutionary Movement. Mr Gandhi must be counted among the counter revolutionaries".

It was not a view shared by Saklatvala and the CPGB. In a message to the founding congress of the Communist Party of India in 1925, Saklatvala made clear his own, and his party's commitment, to the building of a broad anti-colonial alliance, as the way to win self determination, "I must ask you to remember that although the economic independence of the workers and peasants of India is your main task, that you still remain friendly to the National organisations of the Indian peoples, as National independence is the birthright of all peoples".

While the Roys may have believed that Gandhi was firmly in the camp of counter revolution, Saklatvala looked upon him as an important national figure who was well worth cultivating. So much so, that on his visit to India, he made clear that an important part of his trip was to make contact with Gandhi. He was even prepared to reorganise his schedule in order to meet and discuss with the Congress leader. His dialogue with Gandhi was reported in full in the Indian press, and later published as a pamphlet by the CPGB, entitled, 'Is India Different?'

Saklatvala's antagonism towards Roy and his policies first became apparent in 1923. The Communist International had decided to establish an Indian Labour bureau. After an initial meeting in Berlin with representatives of the British party, it was decided to try and illicit Saklatvala's support for the project. However, Saklatvala was reluctant to associate himself with the scheme because of Roy's involvement. According to reports this was because of his mistrust of Roy.

Further evidence of this suspicion is revealed two years later at a Colonial Conference in Amsterdam, called by the Communist International. Saklatvala, who although absent from the conference, made it know that he was totally opposed to working with some of Roy's associates. Roy in turn accused Saklatvala of 'spy mania'. The Conference further revealed that these differences also effected those working inside the Indian Labour movement. Roy's wife Evelyn had attempted to contact Chaman Lal, the Indian labour leader in Paris, but had been told that he was a friend of Saklatvala and that Lal and Saklatvala were opposed to her, or having anything to do with her.

Saklatvala's work in the anti-imperialist movement reveals the tremendous commitment by communists to colonial freedom. It should be remembered that in Britain, during the period of Saklatvala's activity, the overwhelming consensus was in favour of colonialism. The two Labour Governments of 1924 and 1929 made no attempt to upset the colonial balance, and nothing was done to grant India its independence. The Meerut Conspiracy Trial, begun in 1930, continued during the period of the Second Labour Government, with no attempt by that Government to bring it to a halt. Although the parties of the left were committed to an ending of colonial rule, many, even activists within the organised labour movement, supported the ideas of white superiority which underpinned the colonial system.

Saklatvala's activities, particularly at international level, also cast doubts on the accepted wisdom that the world communist movement had a uniform strategy towards colonial freedom, and who should be supported in that fight. This may have been the case after the Communist International's 6th Congress in 1928, but until that time there were certainly major differences, between Saklatvala and the CI's leading spokesperson in India, M N Roy.

Saklatvala's approach towards the anti colonial fight was to try and unite the Labour movement in Britain, with the forces for national liberation in the colonies. His assessment of who those forces were may have altered, which it did between 1928 and 1935. During that period Saklatvala and the CPGB looked upon Gandhi and the Indian National Congress as allies of imperialism. But even during the class against class years Saklatvala's strategy was still to try to build a united front between British and colonial workers. The same kind of perspective, of international working class unity, was adopted by Saklatvala in relation to the fight against racism in Britain.

After its poor start, the CPGB, by the time of its Seventh Congress in 1925, recognised that racism did exist, and was affecting even sections of the organised labour movement. The Congress Resolution called on every party member to, "actively take up the fight against the imperialist prejudices still existing amongst large sections of the working class in Britain". Saklatvala had suffered racism at first hand during his years in India. During a debate in the House of Commons in 1923, he gives a vivid description of an unforgettable experience he had at the hands of the British authorities at the turn of the century.

"If I may be permitted just to give something from my memory of a personal character in this matter. In 1902 a plague was having devastating effects all over India. It was to be taken in hand not merely as a grave problem, but as something to save human lives. There was a Professor Haffkin in those days who was the first man who with some measure of success gave out an anti-plague serum for inoculation. His experiments were being conducted on a large scale. I was then associated as secretary with an important committee of welfare work. The Governor of Bombay, who was then himself staying out of Bombay, immediately sent a telegram to Professor Haffkin to go to him with certain facts and figures at my disposal, I was prevented from entering the white man's club. Ultimately, when it could not be helped, the messenger of the club after telephoning to various government officials took me to the back yard of the club, led me through the kitchen, and an underground passage to a basement room, where the Professor was asked to see me because I was not a white man. That happened twenty five years ago."

Saklatvala spent the first thirty years of his life in India. He knew what colonialism meant and the racism that it involved. It was why he was so attracted by the Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks not only proclaimed their allegiance to socialism, they also demanded the rights of nations to self determination. For Saklatvala the Russian Revolution not only succeeded in overthrowing capitalism, it also smashed the Russian empire. It personified the two beliefs he had by now come to cherish.

The success of the Bolsheviks had been welcomed by many in the British labour movement and not just by the left. In the South London borough of Battersea support for the revolution was particularly strong. Many activists joined the newly formed Communist Party of Great Britain, including a number of Labour councillors. Saklatvala was adopted as the parliamentary candidate for Battersea North by the Battersea Labour Party and Trades Council, in June 1921. He had just resigned from the Independent Labour Party, and had joined the Communist Party. At that time it was possible to be both a member of the Communist Party and the Labour Party at the same time. There were no bans on joint membership until 1925.

Given the record of the Battersea Labour Movement since the

formation of the Trades Council in 1894, Saklatvala was not an unsurprising choice as their candidate. Organised Labour in Battersea was both militantly socialist and anti-imperialist. Saklatvala was known to a number of activists on the Battersea Trades Council. He was also friendly with the previous Labour candidate, Charlotte Despard, who had just retired to Ireland. Like Saklatvala, Despard was a determined anti-imperialist. Her main concern was Ireland, which was looked upon by the Labour movement as a colonial possession. The demands for colonial liberation usually coupled Ireland and India together.

Over the years the Battersea Labour movement had established for itself quite a reputation for international solidarity. At the time of the Boer War, the Battersea Borough Council, which was controlled by the Trades Council in alliance with the Liberals, had proclaimed its opposition to the conflict. Along with the Trades Council it had helped establish a Stop the War committee which organised demonstrations and meetings in support of the Boers. One of the roads in the Borough was named after a Boer General. Collections were made on behalf of the Boers and on one occasion Boer speakers addressed a crowd of over 1400 at Battersea Town Hall. Yet it was an internationalism that was itself tainted with racism. At a Council meeting in February 1903 the Council were asked to support a scheme for the establishment of a General Military Hospital for 20,000 sick soldiers. The scheme was condemned by one councillor as, 'militarism gone mad', and the Council refused to cooperate. In the discussion one of the pro-Boer councillors said, "the Council would not help the Government to fight Boers or anyone else for the sake of the Jews of Park Lane". Anti-Semitism, which gave rise to the Aliens Act in 1905, was widespread and influenced even those who were anti-imperialist.

A decade after the ending of the Boer War, Battersea again showed its opposition to colonialism, by electing T. Brogan as its Mayor. Brogan was an Irish nationalist, and the President of the Battersea branch of the United Irish League of Great Britain. He had been a progressive councillor for a number of years. He was described as, "London's first Irish Catholic nationalist Mayor".

The Mayoralty election of the following year 1913, caused an even bigger sensation. In that year John Archer, a Labour councillor, was elected the Mayor of the Borough. Archer, who was of mixed parentage, described himself as a 'man of colour'. He was born in

Liverpool. His father was from Trinidad, and his mother was Irish. There was a good deal of speculation in the press proceeding his election as to whether he would be elected, but he was supported by the ruling Progressive Alliance who were in the majority on the Council. He was their nomination, and he was the Mayor of the Borough when the First World War broke out. One Progressive councillor in reply to a reporter who suggested that Archer may not be elected because of his colour responded, "we do not recognise any colour prejudices in Battersea". It was a response that was largely true, even a decade later despite a massive press campaign Saklatvala's support amongst the Battersea Labour movement remained solid. It was not until the implementation of the notorious 1924 Labour Party Conference resolution, banning communists from membership, that support began to wane. For its continued support for Saklatvala, the Battersea Labour Party and Trades Council was disaffiliated in 1926, and a few months later an official Labour party and Trades Council was established. There was rivalry between the two organisations for a period, but by the time of the 1929 General Election the old Trades Council existed in name only. In 1927 Stephen Sanders, a long time activist in the Battersea Labour movement, was adopted as the official Labour candidate, and this effectively spelt the death knell of Saklatvala's reign. He lost the seat in 1929, and his vote declined even further at the election of 1931. By the time of the next General Election in 1935, in line with the Communist Party's new strategy he urged his supporters in the constituency to vote Labour.

What is significant is that for five years, from Saklatvala's initial adoption until 1926, there was no challenge to his candidacy from within the local Labour movement. When a challenge did come, it was in response to national influences, and not local politics, and had nothing whatsoever to do with Saklatvala's racial origin.

At his original adoption meeting, in June 1921, according to the Secretary of the Battersea Labour Party, he was selected by an overwhelming majority. At the following two elections of 1923 and 1924, before which he was re-selected, there was no challenge to his candidature from within the local party. It could be argued that Saklatvala presented himself to the Labour movement in Battersea as just another radical socialist -- but that was not the case. He never denied his racial origins, and consistent with his view of building unity between British and Indian workers he never forewent an opportunity of trying to cement that unity. Soon after his adoption as Labour candidate, he addressed a meeting of Indians at

Caxton Hall at which his main theme was the common interests of Indian and British workers. The meeting expressed its confidence in Saklatvala, and congratulated the Battersea Labour Party on its, "broadminded policy of adopting him as its prospective parliamentary candidate". The meeting further requested that a delegation of Indians attend a meeting of the local Labour Party in order that, "the sentiments of the Indian people can be expressed to the rank and file of the Battersea electors". It was just the kind of initiative that Saklatvala welcomed. While Saklatvala enjoyed widespread support amongst the activists in the Battersea Labour movement, what would be their response to the attacks that would undoubtedly be made on him during the campaigns? The evidence suggests that the claim of the progressive councillor made some ten years before was indeed true, 'Battersea recognises no colour prejudices'.

Throughout all three of Saklatvala's election campaigns, when he was the candidate of the Battersea Trades Council, the press concentrated their attack, not on his Indian origins, but on his revolutionary politics. The 'Daily Telegraph' epitomised this consensus in a report on the 1924 election. "The contest in North Battersea promises to be one of the stiffest fights in the campaign, resolving itself in fact into a grim struggle, as at the last election, between Constitutional Government and Communism" Battersea was referred to as, "one of the four red boroughs in the Metropolis. To call it the nerve centre of Communism would be no exaggeration". When racism was used by the opponents of Saklatvala, it was to reinforce the view that revolutionaries were somehow alien to Britain. During the 1923 campaign, Hogbin, Saklatvala's opponent, fed information to the press that there were 'foreign gangs' operating in the constituency. These gang's sole aim was to break up Hogbin's meetings. Initially there was just one gang, referred to by Hogbin as, 'Irish rebels' and which included, 'twenty gunmen'. The next day the newspapers reported that the gang had been joined by another, and Hogbin claimed to have positive knowledge, "that there are two gangs operating in the division, one of Irish Republican gunmen and the another of continental and Russian communists". This view that socialism was somehow foreign was often alluded to in the press. At the start of the 1924 election in Battersea, the Daily Mail set the tone by stating that, "attempts are being made to make free speech impossible. Mr Hogbin is denied the right of speaking at open air meetings by bands of disrupters, in which a foreign element is distinctly noticeable".

The national press in its hostility to Saklatvala concentrated on his politics, rather than his colour. When racism was used, it was used to denigrate socialism as of Russian origin, or alternatively, that its anti democratic supporters were linked to Republican gunmen from across the Irish sea. The picture the media tried to portray was that socialism was all due to foreign influences.

During the campaigns in Battersea Saklatvala's opponent made little use of racism. When there was an attempt to attack Saklatvala because of his racial origins, it brought a swift response from Saklatvala's supporters. The occasion was during the height of the 1923 campaign. There had been allegations in nearly all the national newspapers that Saklatvala's supporters were disrupting his opponent's meetings. In response, Saklatvala issued an appeal calling for restraint, and condemning rowdyism. He also made clear that he was committed to democratic participation. The 'Daily Herald' reported, "North Battersea's Labour champion considers it wrong to hold at such times as these, party meetings to be addressed by representatives of one side only. He therefore invites Conservatives and Liberals to attend his meetings, and address his rallies. He also asks for a similar privilege in return". As good as his word, Saklatvala, at one of his election rallies at Latchmere Baths, invited along Liberal and Tory speakers. His Liberal opponent, Hogbin, declined to attend in person but sent along his representative, a Captain Godfrey. Godfrey used the opportunity to make an attack on Saklatvala that was racist. After first praising Saklatvala's 'splendid sportsmanship' for inviting him to the meeting, Godfrey then went on to proclaim that, "as a representative he had, a distinctive preference for an Englishman". The response from Saklatvala supporters, according to the 'Daily Herald', was, "sharp and noisy". They were on their feet in protest and for a while the whole meeting was in uproar. Undeterred Godfrey continued in a similar tone, and alluded to Saklatvala's, "eastern mentality". It was only Saklatvala's intervention and appeal for calm that allowed Godfrey to be heard. Incidents of this kind do show that Saklatvala's active supporters, those that would attend his meetings, were not prepared to see their candidate subjected to racist slurs. Saklatvala for his part used the meeting to further denounce nationalism and called for the unity of all workers. Saklatvala's appeals for unity, however, stretched only as far as India, Ireland or Egypt. In his election address of that year, his anti colonialism was restricted to those three countries. He told the voters of Battersea that he stood for, "an immediate transformation of the imperial relations of England with Ireland, Egypt and India". No mention was made of Britain's other colonies. Either consciously or unconsciously

Saklatvala, like many on the left at that time, seemed to neglect the aspirations of the African liberation movements. Did he too subscribe to the view that those countries were not yet ready for independence? If he did, then it would reinforce the view expressed by the Communist Party that many living in Britain were prone to imperialist prejudices. Because Saklatvala was Indian it did not follow that he was immune from such attitudes. There is compelling evidence that his contemporary in Battersea, the mixed race John Archer, was undoubtedly influenced by chauvinism. Archer had been subjected to racist slurs when elected mayor in 1913. He had fought back against these attacks, and in this he had been supported by Battersea's Labour movement. Towards the end of his reign as Mayor came the outbreak of the First World War. This was to prove a testing time for all those opposed to nationalism, and Archer, like so many others when the drums rolled and the flags flew, rallied to the supposed patriotic cause. At a Towns Meeting in Battersea, called soon after the war began, he called it, "a just war". He accused the Germans of being 'savages', and demanded their suppression. He told the audience, "members of the German nation had already descended to a lower level than the savages of bygone days and this country would not stop until the German sway was for ever removed from the civilised world." He went on to applaud the Empire and Britain's greatness. "All people in the Empire were coming forth to fight under the British flag and when they did the Germans would know something about it". He concluded with an appeal for all those present to join the army, and sat down to a rapturous applause from a largely pro-war audience. John Archer, non white and Pan Africanist was certainly no paragon of anti-racism.

Although initially Archer and Saklatvala worked together in the Battersea Labour Party and Trades Council, when the split came over the admissibility of communists, they were on different sides. Archer supported the communists expulsion, and when an official Trades and Labour Council was established in July 1926, Archer became the first secretary of the North Battersea Divisional Labour Party. He campaigned against the old Trades Council which still included communists, and championed Stephen Sanders, Saklatvala's Labour rival at the 1929 General Election. Although Saklatvala and Archer were non whites operating in an overwhelmingly white Labour movement, their careers in the 1920s illustrate that politics and not race was the determining factor when it came to allegiances.

Saklatvala's anti-colonial activity between 1921 and 1928 was

concerned with three issues. The exposure of the cruelty of colonial rule, particularly in India, to the workers of Britain. The development of a Communist movement in India, and the creating of links between the Labour movement in Britain and the Indian National Congress. He used his position as an MP to continually raise conditions in the sub continent in the House of Commons. So much so that he was referred to in the press as the MP for India. It was Saklatvala that suggested that the Congress leader, Nehru, be invited to address Parliament.

In his work in the Communist Party Saklatvala was used as a link person between India's developing Communist movement and the British Party. He was held in high esteem both in the CPGB and the Communist International for his knowledge both of India and its National Liberation movement. That did not prevent him from having a critical attitude towards the Communist International's anti-colonial strategy, or from being sceptical of the CI's leading spokesperson on India, M N Roy. His heretical views almost led to his expulsion from the Party in 1928. It was only because of the CPGB's resilience to Communist International pressure that he maintained his membership.

Saklatvala also faced other pressures during this period. They were described by his secretary, Reg Bishop, in an obituary in the Daily Worker. "For the first year or two after his election as the MP for Battersea North, there were many who tried to get him to break from the Communist Party. The Undersecretaryship of State for India was the smallest of inducements held out if he would only be more orthodox in his politics". But Saklatvala refused to conform and was to remain a thorn in the side of the establishment long after his parliamentary career had finished. His activities both as a communist and as an anti-imperialist have left their mark, and the strategies he pursued are still argued about sixty years later.