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[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/40301>]Helen Crawfurd:  
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**Crawfurd** [*née* Jack; *other married name* Anderson], **Helen** (1877–1954), suffragette and communist, was born at 175 Cumberland Street, Glasgow, on 9 November 1877, the fourth of seven children of William Jack, a prosperous master baker, and his wife, Helen Kyle. Her parents had been married in Glasgow in 1872, but Helen spent most of her childhood in Ipswich, and returned with her family to Glasgow only at the age of seventeen when her schooling finished.

Helen's political education was fostered by the involvement of her parents with the Conservative Party; both occupied platform seats at the large Conservative Party meetings in Ipswich and her father represented tory interests in his union, the Operative Bakers' Association. The family's political discussions were combined with religious fervour. William Jack was a strict Presbyterian, in the Church of Scotland, and his wife was a devout Methodist. Their Glasgow upbringing encouraged a strong antipathy towards Irish Catholics. Helen read the Bible avidly and also attended evangelical Sunday school meetings in Glasgow. On 19 September 1898 Helen married a widower, the Revd Alexander Montgomery Crawfurd (1829/30–1914), a staunch campaigner for temperance reform in Scotland and an opponent of militarism.

Against this background Helen developed an early interest in the women's movement. Inspired by Josephine Butler's works on the Contagious Disease Act of 1867, she joined the suffrage movement about 1900 and lent her burgeoning debating skills to group discussions on sexual inequality and political and educational discrimination. In 1910 she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), formed seven years earlier to secure the franchise for women, and she soon became a proponent of the militant tactics adopted by the Pankhursts. In 1912 she was sentenced to one month's imprisonment in Holloway gaol in London for smashing the windows of the residence of the Liberal minister of education in Piccadilly. She was given the same penalty in Glasgow in the following year, for a similar attack on the army recruiting office and for fighting with police at a meeting attended by Mrs Emmeline Pankhurst at St Andrew's Hall. This gave rise to her first hunger strike, which lasted for eight days before she was released under the so-called Cat and Mouse Act (the Prisoners' Temporary Discharge Act of 1913). Hardened by these experiences, before the First World War Helen Crawfurd became one of the most popular speakers in the Scottish suffragette movement. She continued to campaign and to suffer imprisonment, most notoriously for her alleged responsibility for a bomb explosion at Glasgow Botanic Gardens in the summer of 1914. On each occasion she used the hunger-strike technique for propaganda purposes, buoyed up other female prisoners such as Sylvia Pankhurst. She left the WSPU soon after the outbreak of the war, however, owing to its pro-war position.

As with many other women in this period Crawfurd's feminist efforts merged with socialist principles. Her political awareness was influenced partly by the radical plays of Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Maksim Gorky, and others performed by the Glasgow repertory theatre. She was also deeply affected by the disparity in living

standards of people in the slums of Glasgow compared with those of Ipswich's inhabitants. 'These skilled creators of the city's wealth were living in squalor, in houses unfit for human beings', she wrote in her memoirs. 'I began to think there must be something wrong with a system that could allow this' (Memoirs, 29). Although she had in the course of her married life gradually rebelled against much of her religious upbringing, because of the perceived low status accorded women in the Bible, Crawford held on to the scripture's egalitarian pronouncements to produce a form of Christian socialism. In 1914 she joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

During the First World War, Crawford established herself as a national political figure. This was based on her leading role in the anti-war movement and her activities to improve Glasgow's housing for the working classes. In November 1915 she and Agnes Dollan, a close friend and fellow suffragette, established the Glasgow branch of the Women's International League—a predominantly middle-class pressure group opposed to the war, without party affiliations. In June 1917 they helped to form the Women's Peace Crusade, with Crawford as honorary secretary, in order to forge a more working-class and militant opposition to militarism. The two women also worked together in the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915. As secretary of the Glasgow Women's Housing Association, Crawford became a high-profile figure in urging housewives at mass rallies in Govan and Partick to resist rent increases. This resulted in the Rent Restriction Act in December 1915 and, along the way, Crawford's forging of strong links with the shop stewards' movement.

A measure of Crawford's increased standing was her appointment as vice-chairman of the Scottish divisional council of the ILP in 1918. In the immediate aftermath of the war, however, she grew increasingly disillusioned with what she saw as the ILP's lack of radicalism, and she was attracted instead by the movement to set up a British Communist Party, headed by Tom Bell and Arthur MacManus. Initially she worked to establish a communist faction within the ILP and travelled in her official capacity as a visitor to Moscow in July 1920 to attend the Second Congress of the Third Communist International. There she met a number of friends, including Sylvia Pankhurst and Willie Gallacher. During her stay she even managed to interview Lenin, who spoke of recruiting women into the Communist Party.

When the vote for the affiliation of the ILP to the Communist International was rejected at the national conference of the ILP in 1920, Crawford left to join the recently established Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). She was appointed to the executive committee within a year and concentrated from the outset on increasing female membership in the party. Her propaganda expertise led to her editing a separate women's page in the CPGB's official newspaper, the *Communist*, and a part in the creation of the *Sunday Worker*, which disseminated left-wing views in the labour movement.

Throughout the 1920s Crawford's political activities ranged further afield. In 1922 she became secretary of the Workers' International Relief Organisation, formed to assist economically distressed areas such as the Volga province in Russia. Her international reputation as a political organizer grew as she visited countries such as Ireland, where she supported the quest for home rule, and Germany, where in 1924 she addressed an audience of 10,000 people on behalf of the German Communist Party. She also helped to set up a number of international trade union and socialist conferences, such

as the League Against Imperialism in Brussels in 1927. Following several further visits to Russia, Crawford consistently expressed loyal admiration for Stalinism, dismissing the Trotskyists as 'disgruntled elements' (Memoirs, 341). At home she gave active support to the 1926 general strike in terms of food distribution and speeches. She also stood (unsuccessfully) as a Communist candidate in general elections: first in 1929, for the Bothwell division of Lanarkshire, where she polled 1677 votes; and second in 1931 for North Aberdeen, obtaining 3980 votes.

During the 1930s Crawford was closely associated with the Communist Party's front organization, Friends of the Soviet Union. However, she switched the bulk of her attention to fighting the spread of fascism in Europe. In 1933 she became honorary secretary of two committees to combat fascism and antisemitism in Scotland, and in 1938 she organized the Peace and Empire Congress which sought to launch a co-ordinated peace movement throughout the British Commonwealth. When war broke out, like many members of the CPGB her stance was somewhat ambiguous. Answering critics who argued that the Communist Party only supported Britain's war effort when Germany attacked Russia in 1941, she retorted that her fellow communists had to be convinced that Britain was prepared to fight fascism and not to co-operate with it (Memoirs, 374). Her ambivalence was perhaps illustrated by her retirement during the war to a cottage in Dunoon.

Helen Crawford was tall and robust and renowned for wearing stark, black dresses at public meetings. A personal assessment of her career as a feminist and leading radical was made by a fellow party member, who praised her high intelligence and sterling character as a militant and fighter. 'A fluent speaker and sympathetic personality', wrote Tom Bell, 'she is just as at home addressing a meeting of thousands as she is in conversation with the working class housewife ... Had she been self seeking and opportunist I feel certain she could have been among the first women members of Parliament' (Bell, 258).

Crawford's last years included a two-year stint as Dunoon's first woman councillor, immediately after the end of the war, and she continued her commitment to the communist cause through the establishment of a local discussion group on Marxist literature. Having lost her first husband in 1914, she married a steel-master and CPGB member from Coatbridge, George Anderson (*d.* 1951). She died childless at her home, Mahson Cottage, Kilbride Avenue, Dunoon, on 18 April 1954.

Helen Corr

## Sources

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## Archives

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