

The Class Fight in Britain

“Trade Unionism has done excellent work in the past, and in it lies the hope of the workers for the future: that is, the Trade Unionism which clearly recognises that today there are only two classes, the producing Working Class and the possessing Master Class. The interests of these two classes are opposed to each other. The Masters have known this for a long time; the Workers are beginning to see it. They are beginning to understand that their only hope lies in themselves, that from the Masters as a class they can expect no help, and that divided they fall, united they stand. That is why the Union was formed.”

Constitution of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers.

THE above words are taken from the Preamble to the Rules of the second largest trade union in Britain—a union of which the writer of these Notes has been a humble and faithful member for over a quarter of a century, endeavouring to carry out the principles inculcated in his Rule Book. Similar Declarations are to be found in the Constitutions of many of the great trade unions of this country. These Declarations were not adopted as empty rhetorical flourishes. They embody the hard won experience, bought with sweat and blood, of generations of working class struggle. The principles they express are not yet the last word for working class victory. But they are certainly the first word: the indispensable basis of elementary working class organisation. Bitter experience has taught that these principles alone can maintain the working class movement, and that their violation means defeat and destruction. Whoever violates them, however highly placed, is a wrecker, a disrupter, an enemy working to undermine the foundations of trade unionism. In the light of these plainly recognised principles of trade unionism we shall need to consider the outcome of the Margate Trades Union Congress, whose proceedings are reviewed by Harry Pollitt in this number. We need to examine how the injunctions of their Rule Book have been carried out by the officials and delegates of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers at Margate. We need to examine how these principles, enshrined in the very Constitutions of the labour movement, are being practised by Mr. Deakin, Mr. Tewson, Sir Stafford Cripps and Mr. Bevin. And some very practical conclusions will need to be drawn for the future advance of the struggle to further the cause for which the unions were formed.

Two Platforms

The Margate Trades Union Congress revealed two platforms. It revealed the platforms of the Right and of the Left. The Right stood for the sanctity of profits, the forgoing of wage demands, co-opera-

ation with the master class, war on militant trade unionism, disruption of international unity, and dependence on the American Colossus of Big Business. The Left stood for trade union unity at home and abroad, resistance to the employers' offensive, the fight to win improved wages and living standards at the expense of profits, and the strengthening of trade unionism through the methods of class struggle for which the unions were founded. With curious and characteristic insolence the Right sought to denounce the Left (in the intervals of having to present them with medals as the best union builders) as wreckers of trade unionism. The thief cries "Stop Thief!" But every concrete controversy showed who were the disloyal wreckers and who were the loyal fighters.

Anti-Communist Hysteria

All the hysterical denunciations of Communism by the Right at Margate, like the similar hysterical denunciations by Bevin in the House of Commons the following week, have only revealed the frenzied fury of a bankrupt leadership which knows its own programme has ended in fiasco. The comic exaggeration of their attempts to blame Communism for everything that has gone wrong, to explain world history in terms of a Communist conspiracy, and to denounce the mildest, most timidly progressive resolution as a Communist trap, has not only exhibited to the world the nervous prostration and Americanised infection of this leadership. It has also exposed their panic fear of the rising strength and militancy of the working class opposition, which was able to maintain a solid core of two to three million votes within the Congress, in addition to the close margins within many other delegations, and was still more powerfully showing itself outside in the factories and in industry, in the Dockers' strike, the Austin strike, and the march of the thirty thousand Clyde engineers whose thunders penetrated even the Dreamland of Margate at the very moment when Cripps was preaching class peace. The more the chorus of the millionaire press, Government Ministers and the General Council majority in unison denounce Communism as their central target, the more Communism is revealed as the leadership of the working class fight—in Britain also, no less than in France and Italy, in world trade unionism and in the liberation struggle of the colonial peoples. The centenary of the Communist Manifesto is being appropriately celebrated this year also by its enemies.

On Whose Side?

"Today there are only two classes, the producing Working Class and the possessing Master Class. The interests of these two classes are opposed to each other." What about it, Sir George Chester, with your new wisdom on behalf of the General Council to preach the glorious gospel of the Sanctity of Profits to bewildered trade union delegates in the best approved textbook terminology of the London School of Economics (which, be it noted in passing, the General

Council has thoughtfully selected as the ideal training ground for future trade union officials):

Marginal surplus or profit is essential to the conduct of British industry, whether nationalised or in private hands.

In fact, quite "the British way of life". What about it, Sir Stafford Cripps, with your solemn humbug to conceal the colossal profits being made by comparing a mere modest £320 million of distributed dividends of certain selected companies with a wage total of £3,260 million in the entire field of employment—when your own official statistics show that the total of Rent, Interest and Profits after taxation amounted to no less than £2,588 million in 1947 or 36 per cent. of the entire national product, and that represented an increase from 33 per cent. of the entire national product in 1946. £320 million would already represent over £6 a head for every man, woman and child, or £32 for a family of five—not a bad annual nest egg. But £2,588 million is equivalent to £50 for every man, woman and child in the country, or an additional £5 a week for every family of five—representing the surplus from their labour drawn by the owning class, and proclaimed sacred and "unsoakable" by Cripps, Attlee, Deakin and Bevin. To cap the Alice in Wonderland economics of the White Knight Cripps, a real live Henry Dubb was successfully found among the delegates in the shape of a very youthful worker who fervently proclaimed amid applause that they should all work harder and not think about wages—and his photograph duly appeared on the front page of every newspaper the next morning as the true ideal worker dreamed of by every millionaire. "Up with Profits!" "Down with Wages!" What a wonderful, inspiring lead to come from a Trades Union Congress. But, then, why have trade unions? Perhaps by next year the American Gospel will have been more completely mastered, and next year's Congress will be no doubt devoted to the theme of "The Fallacy of Trade Unionism".

"No Saviour From On High Deliver"

"They are beginning to understand that their only hope lies in themselves, that from the Masters as a class they can expect no help." What about it, Miss Florence Hancock, with your solemn presidential pronouncement:

We are satisfied that economic recovery, no less for our own country than for Europe and the world, depends on our acceptance and intelligent use of the resources which the people and the Government of the United States have offered.

Quite the modern paraphrase. "They are beginning to understand that their only hope lies in the U.S.A., that from the Masters of Wall Street they can expect all help". Unfortunately for the new vision of the Bounty of Mammon to replace the old, antiquated class conceptions, the latest Orders from Washington are taking a nasty turn for the prospects of British recovery. Immediately after Sir Stafford Cripps

had delivered his eloquent address to the Trades Union Congress to sacrifice everything for the export drive as the only road to recovery, he had to catch the train to meet Mr. Harriman as the Bailiff's Man in possession on behalf of the American Lords Bountiful and receive the latest directives. And the latest directives made his speech to the Trades Union Congress on the export drive look comic:

It is understood that Mr. Harriman has suggested that a large part of the Western Union defence group's munition manufacturing programme should be carried out in Britain, on the grounds that the British Isles are less likely to be overrun by a Continental Power, and that British industry is less subject than the French to stoppages inspired by the Communists.

It is realised that, if this were to happen, Britain's export trade, and therefore dollar position, would be seriously affected, and some method would have to be found of making up the lost dollars. (The Times, September 7, 1948).

"We'll compensate you, old man, of course we'll compensate you suitably after knocking you out of business."

Tanks or Tractors

In vain Sir Stafford Cripps could endeavour to claim as a triumph of "recovery" in his report for the first half of 1948 that the deficit on the balance of payments was running at a rate of "only" £280 millions a year (military overseas expenditure suitably concealed from view behind sales of war stores, thus leaving the figure announced for the net deficit completely unreal as a current figure), that the dollar deficit was running at "only" £390 million a year, and that the drain on gold and dollar reserves was running at an annual rate of "only" £508 million. But he had to admit that the latter figure far exceeded any prospects of "aid" under E.R.P.: that the drain of £254 million on the gold and dollar reserves in half a year was

still a very large figure, and much in excess of the aid we are receiving or are likely to receive under the European Recovery Programme.

In other words, E.R.P. provides no solution. But indeed this is an under-statement. The total revised allocation for Britain, after Hoffman cracked the whip in Paris to scale down Britain and scale up Western Germany, is £312 million. From this must be deducted (1) £70 million for credits to Europe; (2) £50 million for unfreezing sterling balances; (3) 5 per cent., or over £15 million, for American stockpiling of colonial raw materials: a total deduction of £135 million. This leaves £177 million for the net figure, of which one quarter is to be a loan at interest, thus leaving finally the grand total of £133 million for real net "aid"—or only just over one quarter of the present annual drain on gold and dollar reserves. And even this is conditional on fulfilment of the rearmament programme of the Western Bloc, which would completely distort any plans for economic recovery. As the *Economist* (11.9.48) had to recognise:

Mr. Harriman's suggestion that Britain should turn itself into an arsenal for Western Union is perhaps a hint of the type of reorganisation

likely to persuade Congress that the Western European Powers are willing to do more than watch the Superfortresses fly to and fro.

But the dilemma facing the Five Powers is that in their present economic predicament *they cannot both expand their fighting forces and increase their trade and production.* Men, dollars and raw materials are all scarce. *Europe can make enough tanks or enough tractors; it cannot make enough of both.*

In short, the choice is not Recovery *through* the Marshall Plan, as falsely claimed at the Trades Union Congress. The choice is Recovery *or* the Marshall Plan: you can't have both.

No Political Strings?

At the Trades Union Congress the Chairman's Address of Florence Hancock fervently proclaimed that if there were any question of economic or political strings for Marshall "aid" the trade union movement would never have dreamed of accepting it. We have already seen the economic strings, by which the unanimous resolution adopted by the T.U.C. calling on the Government "to take all possible steps to extend and increase reciprocal trading between this country and the U.S.S.R." is hamstrung by the simultaneous acceptance of the Marshall Plan. Now let us look at the political strings. Listen to Mr. Hoffman laying down the law for France, speaking in Paris on September 10:

He was asked whether aid to France would be cut off if she had a Communist Government. He replied that it certainly would because such a policy had been laid down in the Act. When asked whether the same policy would apply if a totalitarian Government of another colour came in, he said that it was a "highly academic question" . . . He could answer about Communist Governments because the Act specified what would be done. The Act did not say anything about Fascist Governments. His own opinion was that aid should equally be denied to a Fascist Government, but he would not consider a Government headed by General de Gaulle as Fascist. (*The Times*, 11.9.48).

Thus for de Gaulle full aid. For a Communist Government, even though based on an elected parliamentary majority—immediate economic sanctions. This is sufficiently clear political intervention. But of course the green light for reaction and war on Communism is strictly "non-political" in Mr. Deakin's sense, when he complained that the Soviet trade unions were introducing "politics" into the World Federation of Trade Unions because they objected to the Anglo-American right wing demand that the World Federation should be tied to the Marshall Plan and the Anglo-American imperialist bloc.

Unity Under The Ban

"Divided they fall, united they stand. That is why the Union was formed." What heresy from the standpoint of the General Council majority today! Here is the modern version in the mouth of the N.U.G.M.W. official, Tom Williamson, speaking of the left wing trade unionists ("mischief-makers"):

They must not squeal if the unions see to it that they do get out. Twenty-one years ago the same language was heard from a right wing

leader at a Trades Union Congress which is still remembered with shame—the Swansea Congress that met under the banner of Mondism, just as this Margate Congress met under the banner of Marshall:

If the Communists don't like our system and method, let them get out of it. They are better out of the movement than in it.

But it was not the Communists that became company directors and passed out of the movement. It was not the Communists that joined the Tories and stabbed the movement in the back. It was the right wing Communist-eaters. Today the Communists, after all the threats and provocations, are more strongly established than ever in the support and confidence of millions of trade unionists by the record of their work and loyalty and the justification of the policies for which they have fought. But the offensive of the Right Wing is not merely directed against the Left in Britain because they are still a minority. It is equally directed against world trade unionism, because on the world scale the Left is in the majority. In either case the principle of the Right is the same: If you can't get your own way, disrupt unity.

For World Trade Union Unity

So the offensive is turned, under American direction, against the World Federation of Trade Unionism—the greatest organisational achievement of the post-war working class, the greatest achievement of all trade union history, uniting for the first time eighty million trade unionists without distinction of nation, race or colour. The organisation is attacked and denounced by the very man who holds the responsibility as Chairman to work for it because the Anglo-American bloc find themselves a minority within it. Mr. Deakin complained that the Anglo-Americans only controlled three out of eight votes on the Executive. He did not venture to deny that this was considerably more than their proportionate strength. He did not venture to deny that the majority on the Executive represented the majority in the world trade union movement. Such elementary considerations of democracy were foreign to him. There are eight million British trade unionists among eighty million trade unionists of the world. Why should one tenth dictate to the remainder? Why should one tenth lay down the law and demand the right to choose the delegate from the world organisation and refuse to permit the Secretary of the World Federation, to which they are affiliated, to attend their Congress? But this is the curious conception of democracy of the Right Wing. Democracy is well enough, so long as you have a safe majority bloc vote in your pocket. But if you are in a minority, to hell with democracy. Why should we, the glorious sons of Empire, allow a pack of colonial trade unionists to count as our equals? Let us rather make a snug imperialist labour “international” again based on fragments of Western Europe and America. So was delivered the assault which remains the blackest blot on the record of the Margate Trades Union Congress—the rejection of the resolution to “reaffirm support

of the W.F.T.U. and resist attempts to destroy unity inside that body". Well might the Tory *Daily Telegraph* comment:

It was an odd sight to see British trade unionists, hitherto always in the van of international co-operation and the most internationally minded of any national trade union group, administering what may prove to be the death-blow to their own child.

The most intensive fight will need to be waged to defeat this assassin's blow against the foundations of international working class solidarity.

Time To Awaken

The most urgent practical conclusions need to be drawn from the outcome of the Margate Trades Union Congress for the future of the working class fight. Twice before in the past thirty years the siren song of class co-operation and increased production as the supposed path to prosperity has been preached for British trade unionism. The first time was after the first world war, when the Clynes propaganda of the "Gate to More" was plastered on the hoardings. The outcome was the post-war crisis, as soon as the replacement boom was over, which broke out in the winter of 1920 and led to chronic mass unemployment in this country which never ceased until the second world war (those who bless the Labour Government for "full employment" should open their eyes to reality and bless the war—there is no more security of "full employment" in the capitalist conditions of this country than in America). The second time was the poison draught of Mondism and rationalisation two decades ago; then also the American miracle and Fordism was the idol of the hour; then also the Trades Union Congress denounced the Left and worshipped at the shrine of the American Mammon. The outcome was the world economic crisis and the hell of the thirties. We do not want to drink of this poisoned cup a third time. It is time to awake to the fight which stands before British trade unionism.

"Recovery" Moonshine

It is time to awaken from the chloroform fumes of the "recovery" propaganda which is being peddled by Government Ministers and the capitalist press. "Recovery" for whom? "Recovery" for what? Production has been increased by the efforts of the workers, until it is now claimed to be 24 per cent. above the level of 1946, which is stated to have equalled pre-war. Have the workers benefited? The conditions of the workers have grown worse. Real wages have gone down. But profits have soared to record heights, with an increase of £631 millions or 22 per cent. between 1945 and 1947. This is the "recovery". A fine "recovery", where the rich grow richer and the poor poorer. Exports targets have been attained. For what aims? To pay for increased consumption imports? Or to pay for overseas military expenditure and colonial wars and Berlin air-lifts and the foreign policy of Mr. Bevin? New export targets are proclaimed. But already the world market is tightening. The easy sellers' market is coming to an end. American capitalism, fearful of crisis, is multiplying its

export drive and using all its superiority of equipment and its Marshall hold to drive Britain out of market after market. In the home market the fall of purchasing power is revealing itself. The conditions for crisis are maturing. As the difficulties increase, the drive to cut costs of production for export is intensified. And that drive means the new offensive on the wages, standards, conditions and hours of the workers. Cripps said to the Trade Union Congress:

I would rather see the introduction of new methods and new machinery than longer hours of work.

But he pointed out at the same time that there were no resources for the necessary re-equipment of machinery. And the National Union of Manufacturers, welcoming Cripps's statement, drew the moral:

The movement towards shorter working hours should be halted, and indeed in some cases reversed.

There, in the preparation of the new intensified employers' offensive against the workers' standards and conditions, lies the true significance of the right wing policy at the Margate Trades Union Congress, behind all the anti-Communist fanfares which were only the cover.

Rearmament Versus Recovery

The comment of reality on the right wing decisions of Margate was the Government's announcement of its new military programme in the following week, for extended service and increased armaments production and expenditure. The Government's new military programme and the Margate Congress decisions are counterparts of a single policy. It is for this that the workers are called on to sacrifice and go short. The new military programme knocks to pieces the official estimates of the economic perspective. It means the draining of man-power from production. It means the draining of resources from productive uses. The slowing up of demobilisation is only the beginning, the preparation for the extension of military service next year. Housing may be held up, but the production of fighter aircraft is to be doubled. With the resources that might have meant houses for the workers in Britain, the Beaufighters are to be turned out to bomb the huts of Malayan peasants and render them homeless. There is no concealment of the purposes of the new military programme. The new military programme is dictated by the requirements of colonial war and a reactionary international policy.

The Government has to take into account the troubles in Burma, Malaya, India and Palestine. The ordering of the second Guards Brigade to Malaya has substantially affected our strategic reserve. . . .

Russia is not believed to be bent on war. But the Government's plans are by no means entirely dependent on the Moscow negotiations, nor are they due solely to Russian policy. We have to take a wider view, and in the East there are actual hostilities and a risk of their extension.

The battalions of Guards and armoured troops now on their way to Malaya represented the bulk of our last and only mobile strategic reserve. (*Sunday Times*, 29/8/48).

And again

If Britain is to fulfil its commitments in Malaya, the Middle East and

elsewhere, it is essential that the period of service is increased by at least six months. Some Service chiefs . . . would even like to see it increased from one to two years. (*Evening Standard*, 1/9/48).

The aims of colonial war, of imperialist policy are open. Talk of the "Russian danger" is only that blind for reactionary aggressive imperialism. It is for this that the workers are asked to make more sacrifices and increase production, to forgo wage claims and suffer shortage—for the honour of bombing Malayan peasants, executing the heroes of anti-Japanese resistance, shooting down African strikers and demonstrators, and sabotaging international working class solidarity.

Two Offensives

In the class struggle there are only two sides. In the class struggle the alternatives are to fight or go under, to deal the blow that strikes at the enemy or by the loss of opportunity to become the object of attack. The moment of opportunity is still in the hands of the workers; but the offensive of the employers, in conjunction with the Government, against the standards of the workers has already begun. By the policy of price increases, cutting down of subsidies and the wage freeze, the offensive has in fact begun; but this beginning is only a first stage of the full offensive which is inexorably preparing from the present economic situation and the policy of the Government. It is not enough to warn against and prepare for this offensive whose threatening shadows already loom large. The best defence is attack. The urgent need is to press forward the workers' offensive now, while the conditions of relatively full employment are still favourable, in the fight for wage increases and improved standards, against high prices and high profits, and for the reversal of the present disastrous reactionary policy of the Government. The Margate Congress decisions failed to give the leadership for this fight. But the strength, solidarity and tenacious battle of the millions-strong opposition represented at the Congress, no less than the developments outside the walls of the conference chamber, have shown the gathering of the forces for the fight in front. And the proceedings of the Congress, no less than the developments outside, have shown also the role which Communism is playing and will play in the leadership of this new advance of the working class fight in Britain.

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R. P. D.

The Editor of LABOUR MONTHLY will be very glad to receive contributions in the form of finished articles or of suggestions and data for articles. The customary proviso must be made that no responsibility is undertaken for manuscripts sent to him nor can he promise to enter into any correspondence regarding contributions not accepted.

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