

THE I.L.P.—HAS IT REALLY CHANGED?

By J. R. CAMPBELL

In this situation there are two great imperatives. First they must break with the Labour Party; then they must unite on a policy of revolutionary socialism. The first is a preliminary to the second. The break: then unity.

IN these words Mr. Fenner Brockway, the Chairman of the Independent Labour Party, in his speech at Bradford, described what he conceived to be the task before this Conference.

The Conference followed his lead, and carried a motion for disaffiliation from the Labour Party by 241 votes to 142.

What does this decision signify? Does it mean a real break with reformism and the adoption of a revolutionary policy? Can there be a revolutionary policy distinct from that of the Communist Party?

What are the reasons put forward by the Independent Labour Party for breaking with the Labour Party?

Mr. Brockway told the Bradford Conference:

When the second Labour Government proved no better than the first, but actually worse, when once again the Labour Party in office adopted a non-socialist and even anti-socialist policy, the I.L.P. in the assertion of its socialist convictions inevitably came in conflict with the Standing Orders (of the Parliamentary Labour Party, J.R.C.)

We rebelled against the Standing Orders because they required the I.L.P. to refrain from voting against legislation which was opposed to the interests of the working class and was a betrayal of Socialism.

There is no ambiguity about this statement. The Labour Government according to this statement was carrying through an anti-socialist policy. The I.L.P. was valiantly fighting for a socialist policy. The conflict over policy stressed itself in a conflict around the Standing Orders of the Labour Party, so Mr. Brockway alleges.

The Character of the I.L.P. Opposition to the Labour Government

There can be no question about the fact that the Labour Government pursued an anti-socialist policy. There is no evidence, however, that the I.L.P. ever attempted to mobilise the working class around a genuine socialist policy in opposition to the Labour Government.

An examination of the measures advocated by the I.L.P. in opposition to the National Government will show that they fell under three heads.

In the first place advocacy of alternative capitalist policies to those being pursued by the Labour Party. Secondly the advocacy in a spirit of purest demagoguery, of utopian measures to be adopted by the Labour Government within the limits of the capitalist system, and thirdly, sham opposition to the attacks of the Labour Government on the workers, while refusing to organise resistance to those attacks in the only way such resistance could be organised—namely by mass struggle of the working class outside Parliament.

A good example of the latter method is afforded by the "opposition" of the I.L.P. group in Parliament to the various measures of the Labour Government attacking the unemployed.

Now and then the I.L.P. group in the knowledge that the Liberals and Tories were voting with the Labour Party would stage some sham opposition to the Government on its treatment of the unemployed. At no time, however, did the I.L.P. attempt to organise the unemployed to struggle against the policy of the Labour Government. The I.L.P. group made dramatic gestures in Parliament, but outside its members helped to return Labour candidates at bye-elections, to co-operate in Labour groups in city councils, carrying forward capitalist policy.

Occasionally the opposition took the form of recommending an alternative capitalist policy to that pursued by the Labour Government. When in the Cotton industry, for example, the Labour Government was encouraging the policy of "voluntary" rationalisation (with, of course, pressure from the banks) the Independent Labour Party recommends the "reorganisation" of the Cotton industry as a public service, *i.e.*, the stimulation and control of the rationalisation process by the capitalist state.

A typical example of the putting forward of utopian suggestions for improving the condition of the working class under capitalism is provided in the Living Wage Bill which Maxton introduced in 1930 in the midst of a heavy attack on working class wages.

This Bill provided for : the setting up of a Living Wage Commission to determine what a living wage was ; the setting up of a Reorganisation Commission to force the capitalist rationalisation of any industry that could not pay the living wage fixed by the first named Commission.

In other words rationalisation is the way to higher wages.

Thus at a critical period of struggle working-class attention is switched away from the necessity and possibility of building a united front in the industries and trade union branches against the capitalist attacks and diverted to the possibility of converting the Labour Government from a government attacking the workers into a government guaranteeing a living wage.

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Many other current capitalist ideas were advocated by the I.L.P. during the lifetime of the Labour Government.

It was a strenuous advocate of managed currency and inflation, of camouflaged tariffs in the form of Import Boards, of State capitalist rationalisation through the medium of public corporations.

The claim of the I.L.P. was not that the reformist policy of the Labour Party was wrong, but that the I.L.P. was the guardian of the policy of the Labour Party which had been thrown over by the Labour Government.

"In actual fact," wrote Mr. Paton, Secretary of the I.L.P., to Mr. Arthur Henderson, "there is only one issue upon which the I.L.P. Conference has instructed its members to vote contrary to the declared policy of the Labour Party, and that is the issue of armaments, upon which differences of opinion and votes have always been expressed in the Parliamentary Labour Party without challenge.

"If there have been a number of occasions on other issues when the members of the I.L.P. Parliamentary Group have voted independently of the official whip, this has been because they have felt that the principles of the Labour Party and their election pledges, given within the terms of the authorised programme, have left them no option." (N.A.C.'s report to Blackpool I.L.P. Conference).

After the experience of the Labour Government which according to Mr. Brockway adopted "a non-socialist and even anti-socialist policy," the Independent Labour Party at the General Election last year called for support for Labour candidates and for a third Labour Government.

If such was the real character of the opposition, why did the Labour Party insist so fiercely about the I.L.P. conforming to the Standing Orders of the Parliamentary Party and not voting against the Government?

Mainly we think because the Labour Party, being a governing party, wanted to make it clear to the capitalist class that it was a coherent, disciplined party, capable of being trusted with the carrying out of capitalist policy. To the extent to which the advocacy of alternative capitalist policy and the indulgence from time to time of sham left demagoguery on the part of the I.L.P. tended to create an unfavourable impression of the unity of the Labour Party, that Party had to attempt to force the I.L.P. into conformity.

Gramophone Records To Suit All Tastes

Why then did the I.L.P. break with the Labour Party? Undoubtedly there was a growing opposition in the I.L.P. membership to affiliation to the Labour Party. But this opposition was by no means strong enough to force the leaders to adopt the policy of disaffiliation. So far from the movement from below pushing the leaders reluctantly

into a policy of disaffiliation the dominant group of the leaders led the movement for disaffiliation. Not only the moods of their own members, but the general left-ward swing of the masses induced those leaders to believe that if they could get the masses to believe that the I.L.P. was fundamentally different from the Labour Party, with which many workers were dissatisfied, then the left workers could be won for the I.L.P.

The I.L.P. leaders were, of course, prepared to remain inside the Labour Party provided that they could get a compromise on Standing Orders to enable them to claim that the I.L.P. had really won a socialist victory over the Labour Party. When that possibility was denied them they broke.

But in the negotiations with the Labour Party before the final break, Mr. Brockway gave the following estimation of the Labour Party :

I think it may be useful to say that the I.L.P. accepts the objective of the Labour Party—Socialism—and, in general, its programme. There are isolated issues upon which we differ in that programme. But on major issues we accept it.

The difference between the two organisations relates to method and policy. I need not describe these differences in detail. In a sentence the I.L.P. regards Socialism, not as a distant ideal to be reached by a series of modifications of capitalism, but as an immediate necessity to be applied decisively, as soon as the power to apply it is obtained.

On August 5 this statement appears on page 3 of the *New Leader*. The Labour Party's object is Socialism and its programme (*i.e.*, the measures it advocates for attaining its objective) is socialistic.

But lo and behold, the next week on the same page reviewing the New Labour Programme (largely the old one rehashed) we are told : " The Labour Party proposals do not go further than attempts to control the capitalist system in such a manner as to iron out its irregularities and distribute its proceeds more equitably."

In short the I.L.P. has " broken " from the Labour Party, but as to what the Labour programme and policy really is, well one week it is socialist and the next week it is capitalist—you pay your money and you take your choice, or you change the record on the gramophone to suit the audience.

No Real Break with the Labour Party

Obviously so long as the I.L.P. holds to the estimation of the Labour Party's programme that is given by Mr. Brockway, there is no genuine break with the Labour Party, for this false estimation leaves—and is meant to leave—the road back to the Labour fold still open to the I.L.P.

Has the I.L.P. broken with the daily practice of the Labour Party ?

After the defeat of the Labour Government there was a strong tendency on the part of the Labour Party right wing to blame the apathy

of the workers for the defeat of the Labour Party. To declare that the workers were hopeless, apathetic, ignorant and deserved to be allowed to starve.

This is also the main stock-in-trade of the I.L.P. leadership. In the midst of the terrific battle of the Lancashire cotton textile workers, of the resistance of the London busmen to cuts, of a rising wave of unemployed struggle, Mr. Brockway tells the world :

The working class is fatalistic. It has lost faith in both the political and industrial movements and can see no way out. . . . The working class must be shaken out of their fatalism by a policy which is distinctive from the past. Revolution—in the sense of a complete transformation—must replace reform.

(Lecturer at Summer School reported *New Leader*, August 19, 1932.)

This gentleman said a few months after the formation of the National Government that the workers could not resist wage cuts successfully and what was wanted was a National Rent Strike.

If the I.L.P. had really broken with the Labour Party it would recognise the splendid militancy of the working class and would recognise that the first step in the organisation of the struggle of the working class for power, is the organisation of the working class for the struggle against the capitalist offensive.

This immediate task is, however, shirked. However much the I.L.P. may praise the militancy of the working class once the struggle has broken out it takes no part in preparing the struggle.

Instead it talks about apathy and : “revolution—in the sense of a complete transformation—must replace reform.” (Brockway at I.L.P. Summer School.)

What does this latter phrase mean? It does not mean that reformist policy must be replaced by revolutionary policy. It means that organisation of the struggle for the everyday demands of the working class—without which there can be no advance to the seizure of power by the workers—is replaced by propaganda generalities about socialist planning, &c., after the revolution. In the name of the replacement of Reform by Revolution the I.L.P. disorganises the present struggle of the working class. There is no break with the Labour Party policy here.

On the question of the war there was no break with the policy of the Labour Party. In one and the same resolution the League of Nations was denounced and the workers were asked to get “common action by the General Council of the T.U.C. and the National Executive of the Labour Party to bring effective pressure to bear upon the Government.” This was issued at the very moment when those bodies were calling upon the Government to call upon the League of Nations to boycott Japan.

Lest we imagine that the Bradford Conference changed all this, let us look at the new constitution adopted by the Conference.

The new I.L.P. constitution says "It (the I.L.P.) reaffirms its demand for disarmament by example, irrespective of what other governments may do."

There are only two meanings to this demand. Either the I.L.P. is saying that in a capitalist world driving headlong to a new war a capitalist government like the National Government can disarm, which is spreading a dangerous illusion amongst the workers that Disarmament is possible under capitalism, or it is asking the Government of the Soviet Union to disarm in face of the imperialists, which is treacherous in the highest degree.

The I.L.P. and the Conquest of Power

The fundamental test of a revolutionary party is its attitude to the taking of power by the working class.

We have already quoted the phrase of Brockway: "Revolution—in the sense of a complete transformation." This phrase embodies an old trick of reformists, employed frequently in times when there is a revolutionary ferment amongst the working class.

The phrase "Revolution" is employed by them frequently for the purpose of deluding the workers into believing that they mean the revolutionary seizure of power—when what they really mean is a "complete transformation" to be brought about in some mysterious way *without* the revolutionary seizure of power.

To a Marxist, revolution has one meaning—it means the forcible overthrow of the existing ruling class; the revolutionary seizure of political power by a new social class aiming at the transformation of society. People who mean anything different from this should employ a word with different meanings.

What does the I.L.P. say about how the working class is to take power from the ruling class?

One section of the "revolutionaries," led by Messrs. Beckett and Skinner, pin their faith to Parliament. At the Bradford Conference, according to the *New Leader*:

He (Beckett) pointed out the difficulty of trying to fight parliamentary elections if the people at the same time had to be told that Parliament was of no use. If the I.L.P. did not believe in municipal and national government it would have to work underground to bring about a real revolution. He urged the I.L.P. should work through local and national machinery for government and man it with people it could trust.

Mr. Allan Skinner, discussing the relation between the I.L.P. and the C.P., at the I.L.P. Summer School, said:

The real difference between the bodies is that the I.L.P. are democrats and the C.P. are not. He doubted the view held by a certain section of the I.L.P. that before a socialist majority in Parliament can be secured there will be a reactionary dictatorship.

He thought by preparing the minds of the workers for such a possibility the atmosphere is being created for a Fascist *coup d'etat*. The I.L.P. ought to be training the workers to use democratic machinery.

These two speeches are good old-fashioned Labour Party efforts. Messrs. Beckett and Skinner will be useful go-betweens when the time comes for the I.L.P. to return to the Labour Party fold.

Then there is Mr. Fenner Brockway, who makes what the *New Leader* calls an important contribution to this question :

Governmental power by the workers, Mr. Brockway told the I.L.P. Summer School, would help that change, and the I.L.P. must go all out to get parliamentary and municipal power.

The I.L.P. alone might not get that power, but Brockway took the view that community of conviction would be more important than organisational differences, and in the long run all Left Socialists must come together.

But the critical situation may develop before we get parliamentary power, and because of that possibility the minds of the workers must be prepared for other action.

This is sheer confusion. There can be no really critical situation for capitalism independent of the struggle of the working class against capitalism. Brockway says to the workers, irrespective of what you do, a critical situation may arise and therefore you should be ready for it coming. Whereas, the really critical situation will only arise if the workers effectively develop the present struggle around war, wages, unemployment, &c. Not prepare for a critical situation, but develop the present struggles into a powerful political struggle for the overthrow of capitalism, must be the mainspring of our efforts. But to the I.L.P. which plays no part in organising the immediate struggle this is anathema.

But let us go on. A revolutionary situation according to the hypothesis has developed. The workers must either overthrow the capitalist class or be thrown back into the most abject slavery. There is, according to the hypothesis, only a Socialist minority in Parliament. What does Brockway suggest should be the I.L.P. attitude.

With regard to Socialism, Brockway stated that capitalism is the greatest denial of Socialism, and in a revolutionary situation the pacifist cannot stand aside but must use his influence for the disciplined action of the working class to prevent or limit violence and bloodshed.

Can you believe it. At the decisive moment when the classes confront each other, when all the force at the disposal of the capitalist class will be mobilised to throw back the workers, when the preoccupation

of every honest worker will be to mobilise every ounce of working-class force and employ it in the most ruthless and effective way against the class enemy—this pharasaical gang of counter revolutionaries will be preoccupied with “using their influence to prevent or limit bloodshed.” In other words they will go to the working class facing a capitalist class armed to the teeth and pretend that there is some middle way of overthrowing the capitalist class, without using the utmost violence against it.

What this middle way is, is not stated by Mr. Brockway, but his colleague, Campbell Stephen, tells us that “I believe that in spite of all the talk of never again, it is only when the organised working class of this country make up their minds that the time is ripe for another General Strike, with the objective of taking power and sweeping away capitalism, that we shall have a growing organisation of the workers in the Trade Union movement.”

If the I.L.P. leaders really believe that by a peaceful General Strike one can overthrow capitalism, one wonders where they were in 1926.

The outstanding lesson of that strike was that a General Strike calls up the whole armed forces of the capitalist State and presents the alternative of the strike developing into a revolutionary movement for the smashing of the capitalist State or the State advancing to smash the strike.

Naturally one cannot stage a General Strike at will nor develop that strike into an insurrection in the absence of a revolutionary situation which will in some measure affect the State forces. But given that situation the General Strike must develop into an insurrection to overthrow the capitalist class by force or it is doomed to defeat.

This is not the first occasion on which the idea of a peaceful General Strike has been held as the means of overthrowing the capitalist class. It was believed in by many left wing trade union leaders before 1926. The actual experience of a real General Strike and its problems not only cured those leaders of that delusion, but scared them into the arms of the right wing.

The conclusion is obvious. Has the I.L.P. changed. There is a deep change taking place amongst the rank and file undoubtedly. But in the leadership there is only some new phrases hiding the old reformist policy; new ways of sabotaging the growing movement of the British workers towards the acceptance of a revolutionary policy.