

The Labour Movement and the War

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BRITAIN IS AT war with German Fascism. Its war Government is under the control of the men who were dominant in the National Government of recent years. The Labour movement has in the past painted a fairly clear and damning picture of these men and the foreign policy they were pursuing.

The Blackpool Trades Union Congress of 1938 placed it on record that :

In our view, the policy of the National Government has contributed to bolstering up the Fascist Governments of Italy, Germany and Japan, which Governments are totally opposed to free Trade Unions, Co-operative Societies and other working-class organisations, and have either destroyed or suppressed the liberty of their peoples. This Congress declares its emphatic opposition to such a Tory policy, which is not only lowering to the prestige of the British nation, but, owing to its vacillating character, is actually provocative of war.

The Southport Conference of the Labour Party held in May-June, 1939, was equally condemnatory.

"This Conference," said the resolution on the international situation "sternly condemns the shameful record of the so-called National Government which during the past seven and a half years has repeatedly condoned aggression, betrayed Democracy in Spain, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere, sapped the foundations of the League of Nations and gravely imperilled the security of our own country."

Such was the Labour movement's characterisation of the National Government, i.e., the Government which with one or two new faces is ruling us to-day.

It is worthwhile, therefore, to ask ourselves what was the attitude of the Labour movement towards the Government both in the period before and the period immediately after the declaration of war.

One of the principal questions of the immediate pre-war period was the struggle of the democratic forces of this country to force the Government to conclude an immediate pact of mutual assistance with the Soviet Union. The resolution on the international situation at the Southport Conference expressed :

Its deep concern at the prolonged delay in concluding a definite and unequivocal pact with France and the Soviet Union for mutual defence.

This resolution was passed on Tuesday, May 30. From that moment until the middle of August, when the Anglo-Soviet negotiations broke down, the Labour movement conducted no real campaign for the signing of the Anglo-Soviet Pact. Yet when the negotiations break down, the same Labour movement proceeds in advance of any information to condemn the Soviet Union.

When the Soviet-German Pact was signed the *Daily Herald* excelled all other papers in vituperation. "If there is a war of aggression against Poland," said Mr. Francis Williams, "heavy indeed will be the burden of Soviet guilt." This type of argument overlooks the fact that throughout the Anglo-Soviet negotiations the Soviet Union offered to guarantee both the Baltic States and Poland against aggression from without and within. The precious weeks went past and the British Government was unable to find a formula that would cover indirect aggression in the Baltic States. The British complaint was not that the Soviet Union was offering to do too little but on the contrary was offering to do too much.

The attitude of Poland—or rather should we say Polish Fascism—was even more remarkable. It was that the Soviet Union could supply Poland with munitions or with aeroplanes, but that as far as the defence of Poland was concerned Soviet troops were not needed. This attitude was supported by the British Government.

We do not believe that British or French generals could endorse such fantastic strategy. It was political considerations which determined this line. Is it any wonder that the Soviet Union felt that what it was being invited to do was (1) to embroil itself in a war with Nazi Germany ; (2) to refrain from such military action as would enable it to speedily win the war ; and (3) to have to bear the full weight of war with Nazi Germany after the latter had been allowed to smash through Poland without effective resistance ?

Is it any wonder that to the Soviet Union this looked more like a plan for diverting German aggression eastwards against the Soviet Union than for winning a decisive victory over Fascism ? How in the light of the defeats sustained by Poland in the first days of the war can this attitude of the British, French and Polish governments during the negotiations with the Soviet Union be justified ?

Yet the official Labour movement sweepingly condemned the Soviet Union at the very moment when other critics of the National Government were putting the responsibility where it belonged. Writing of the failure to conclude a pact with the Soviet Union, Mr. Lloyd George said :

We must not conceal from ourselves the enormous difference it would have made to our chances in this hour . . . if two powerful Russian armies were advancing

That was the plan placed before our military mission by Voroshilov, the Soviet War Minister. The tragic story of the rejection of this plan has yet to be told and the responsibility for the stupidities that lost

us Russia's powerful support justly affixed and sternly dealt with. (*Sunday Express*, September 10, 1939.)

Another curious argument of the Labour Party was to the effect that even if the Soviet Union had been denied the possibility of concluding a pact of mutual assistance with France and Britain it need not have concluded a pact of non-aggression with Nazi Germany. This is to ask the Soviet Union to put itself in a position where it could be made the victim of an appeasement agreement between Britain and Germany which would have led to Germany attacking the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had its own good reasons for believing that this was the aim of the famous Munich agreement of September, 1938. If it could not get the full protection of a water-tight pact of mutual assistance it was at least entitled to conclude a pact of non-aggression based on its own military strength.

The result of that pact is known to all. In the very same article we have just quoted Mr. Francis Williams says :

But for Russia's neutrality Germany has had to pay a heavy price and the full bill has not yet been presented.

She has certainly lost as potential allies in war Japan and Spain. She has staggered her associates in Italy.

And in the alignment of forces and particularly in the employment of our already overwhelming naval forces, these facts will count heavily in favour of France and ourselves.

The similar estimation of the results of the German-Soviet Pact was up till and beyond the outbreak of war expressed almost nightly in the B.B.C. broadcasts to Germany. Like the Government, therefore, the official Labour movement ran two contradictory lines of propaganda: (1) that the German-Soviet Pact encouraged Hitler aggression, and (2) that it had deprived Hitler of allies.

The latter is more in accordance with the truth. Hitler has started the war without the aid of those allies whom everyone expected to stand by his side.

A Labour movement that based itself upon an analysis of the past policy of the National Government would not have credulously accepted the British Foreign Office's version of the Soviet-German pact. It would have remembered the long-drawn out hatred of British Toryism for the Soviet Union, the thinly concealed hostility of members of the Government to the whole idea of the Anglo-Soviet pact and it would have concentrated its attack on the National Government, whose whole attitude led to the breakdown of negotiations. Instead of telling the British people that it was their own government which bore the major responsibility for the breakdown of negotiations, the official Labour movement regard the Munich politicians whom its own resolutions had condemned for "repeatedly condoning aggression," as if they were a lot of deeply injured innocents. Instead of telling the British people that their defence required an entirely new Government which could enlist the co-operation of the Soviet Union

and the U.S.A., all the venom of the Labour leadership was concentrated on the Soviet Union.

Unless the whole of the past analysis of the National Government by both Labour Party and Trade Union Congress was at fault, the first question that should have been posed was: "Is a government composed of men with such a record capable of defending the interests of the working class or representing the interests of the British people?" These questions were never put. Criticism of the Soviet Government was a smoke screen behind which the Labour Party marched to co-operation with the National Government.

It is true that the Labour Party refused an offer of seats for two of its members in the new War Government. It is true that in a circular to local Labour Parties it stressed the need for maintaining its independence. But the independence of the Labour Movement is no empty formality. Independence means pursuing a different policy from that pursued by the government and struggling for a change of government in order that the policy shall be carried out. Independence does not mean the refusal to enter a given government; it means an active struggle for a new government. Without such a struggle independence can have no real meaning.

It is from this standpoint that we must judge the 71st Trade Union Congress which met at Bridlington the day after the declaration of war.

This Congress had two tasks to accomplish. It had to give a clear analysis of why the war had come and what the attitude of the Labour movement was to the prosecution of the war, and it had to outline a policy with regard to the protection of the economic and social interests of the working class in war-time. It attempted neither.

Delegates failed to get Congress to instruct the General Council and the General Purposes Committee to bring forward recommendations stating clearly the independent attitude of the whole movement in war time and demanding legislation that would protect the interests of the workers and the people at the same time as it helped to successfully prosecute the war to liberate all peoples from the yoke of Nazi aggression.

At the outset of the Congress it was explained that the General Purposes Committee could not bring forward such a programme as consideration would have to be given to it which was impossible in the time before Congress. It was obviously overlooked that during the whole of the past year the General Council has been in consultation with the Government in preparation for such emergencies as now confronted them.

This failure to bring forward proposals as to the specific way the Trade Union movement should maintain its freedom of action to secure the well-being of its members, prevent abuses and profiteering, can only be interpreted as complete abdication before the Government.

The discussion on the international situation revealed the complete

failure of the Congress to face up to the problems created by the war.

Mr. Hallsworth, in his Presidential speech did say, however :

Wiser, firmer and more far-sighted statesmanship on the part of our Government could have averted many, if not most, of the dangers that now threaten the world's peace.

This is then discounted in the emergency resolution on the war that was presented in the form of a Declaration to the German people, which said it was the German Government :

and their Government alone, that has struck at the foundations upon which the free nations sought to build a new international order to preserved freedom and safeguard peace.

A number of the delegates sought to have the full responsibilities for the present situation placed on the shoulders of all who were responsible. As stated very clearly by W. Zak, of the Furnishing Trades :

I cannot agree, as is stated in the proposed Declaration that Hitler alone is responsible. In view of all the past decisions of Congress, in view of the fact that it has repeatedly condemned Chamberlain, I feel that Congress cannot say it has confidence in Chamberlain. Disarmed Germany could not in the six years since Hitler took power in 1933 have re-armed to the point to which it has at the present time, when it has involved us in a war, had it not been for the assistance which has been given to Nazi capitalism by British Toryism and the Chamberlain Government.

The real line of the right-wing leadership came out in the statement of the General Secretary, Sir Walter Citrine, particularly in his reply to the discussion. His concern was to indict the Soviet Union and defend the policy of Chamberlain. The *Daily Herald* of September 5, quotes him as saying :

Russia was going to supply Germany with oil and other commodities essential for the prosecution of the war. That was a consequence of the trading agreement. . . . They could not get behind the fact that Russia, with whom they were negotiating, made a pact with the enemy. It was unquestionable that Russia had precipitated the war.

I would like to know what the secret clauses of the Agreement were. It did not require Ribbentrop and 32 others to negotiate a six-point Pact.

It is quite obvious that Sir Walter Citrine's well-known abhorrence of the Soviet Union has blinded him to what everyone else who cares to examine the position can plainly see.

What justification has he for saying that "Russia was going to supply Germany with oil and other commodities essential for the prosecution of the war," and thereby imply that it is on the side of the Nazis against Britain ?

Sir Walter based his argument on the Soviet-German Trade Agreement. Under the terms of this agreement Germany was to furnish the Soviet Union with credits in the form of machine tools, etc., and the Soviet Union would supply Germany with a certain amount of wheat and oil. It never struck Sir Walter to enquire whether this agreement was one which was meant for peace time or war time. A few days later, when the Soviet partial mobilisation took place,

there was immediate rationing of petrol in the Soviet Union—the fact being that given its own needs and the increased needs of its army in a state of partial mobilisation there is no surplus of oil in the Soviet Union on which Nazi Germany or anyone else will draw. A few days later the Soviet Union declared that it would supply goods to no country that was not able to pay cash down—a thing that Nazi Germany is manifestly unable to do. Sir Walter Citrine's myth of a vast supply of Soviet goods being placed at the disposal of the Nazi aggressors is a product of his unbridled hatred of the Soviet Union.

According to Citrine, the Russians, behind the backs of the people with whom they were negotiating, made a pact with the enemy. Let us look a little closer to the facts.

If Sir Walter would think a little less hastily and not permit his hatred to run away with his head, he would have amended his statement—"The action of Russia in concluding this pact has precipitated this war"—to read—the action of Britain in failing to conclude a Pact of Mutual Assistance with Russia has precipitated this war.

Let us put the responsibility where it belongs. All of us have now to face up to our responsibilities for permitting the Government of this country since 1931 to aid and abet aggression. A great deal of this responsibility rests upon the British Trade Union and Labour movement. For never yet have we challenged in any effective way the policy of Chamberlain and Co.

Another argument which Citrine used was as follows. "Suppose a trade union is negotiating with another union with regard to common action against an employer. What would you think of one of the unions which went behind the back of the other and signed an agreement with the employer?"

An analogy should fit the facts. There were two employing class states (Britain and Germany) and one workers' state (the Soviet Union)—or in terms of Sir Walter's analogy two employers and one trade union. Both employers (Germany and Britain) had co-operated against the Soviet Union at Munich last year, for everyone now realises that the real meaning of the Munich agreement was to divert German expansion against the Soviet Union. Now one of the employers (Great Britain), fearing an attack from the other (Germany) was anxious to get the aid of the trade union (Soviet Russia) but was not anxious to fully guarantee the trade union against an attack from the other employer (Germany) because it (Britain) still hoped to get the other employer to attack the trade union. When the trade union realised that it could not get a firm agreement with the first employer (Great Britain) to stand against the second (Germany), when it saw that the first employer was still hopeful of inducing the second to attack it, it had to safeguard itself. This it did by signing a non-aggression pact with the second employer.

That is the analogy which Sir Walter might have used if he had

not characteristically forgotten the class character of the states in question.

We could quote indefinitely to show the age-long hostility of the dominant leadership of the British trade unions to anything connected with the Soviet Union and their complete failure to understand the working-class character of the Soviet Government or its policy. Side by side with this we can place the record of the T.U.C. in relation to the Tory Governments and more particularly in its relations with the National Government.

A change is taking place, however, which will be strengthened with the growth of trade unionism in this country. This change is becoming more evident among the workers in the factories and among the class-conscious elements inside the trade union movement. The attitude of such unions as the Engineers, Miners, Distributive Workers, Building and others at their 1939 Annual Conferences is just one of the indications of this change. In conditions of war, when the workers will undoubtedly express their anti-fascist feelings and determinedly struggle to remove Fascism for ever, there must simultaneously take place a change in the attitude of the trade union movement as a whole.