

Trade Unions in the Strait Jacket of War

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THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS will meet in the fourteenth month of the war, when the civilian population of the warring countries is undergoing unprecedented horror and suffering. Day and night the bombs of the rival Imperialisms are concentrating not on attacking each others' armies but on destroying the industries and the workers which supply these armies. Heavy as the casualties have been both in London and Berlin, it is only a rehearsal on a small scale for what has yet to come.

On both sides the standard of life of the workers has been savagely driven down. In Britain the Government admits a rise in the cost of living to the extent of 4s. in the £1. How many workers earning £3 or £4 per week in September, 1939, have received the increase of 12s. or 16s. per week which would be necessary to maintain the purchasing power of their wages at the September level? For we must never forget that the vast majority of the working population in Britain are not employed on munition industries where they could supplement their normal wages by overtime and Sunday work. A recent survey, undertaken by the *Economic Journal*, is illuminating in this respect.

In Islington for every working-class family whose income had increased there were roughly three whose income had decreased, and three whose income was the same. Thus, taking the rise in the cost of living into account the great majority of the Islington families were being forced below the standard of living they were used to in peace-time. In Coventry nearly half had increased their income; of the rest 32 per cent had the same income as pre-war, 20 per cent had less.

(*Economic Journal* for July, 1940.)

The noticeable thing about this is not that the general standard of life of the people in non-munition districts had fallen—that we knew—but that the income of half the people in a munition district like Coventry had fallen also (i.e. the 32 per cent whose income was the same, and the 20 per cent whose income had fallen in the midst of a rising cost of living).

Even when we take the "favoured" munition workers we find a situation much different from that imagined by gentlemen who talk glibly about wage profiteering. The above-mentioned survey gives the following facts. Wage rates in metals had increased by 11·4 per cent and in shipbuilding by 7·9 per cent. Compare this with a rise of 20 per cent in the cost of living. Earnings in the metal industries had increased by 7 per cent and in shipbuilding had actually decreased by ·5 per cent.* So even overtime and piecework are not resulting in vastly increased earnings in all munition trades.

* This requires some explanation in view of the increase in wage rates. The fact is that shortages of material and mismanagement have decreased earning power amongst the pieceworking trades in shipbuilding.

It is in this situation that the Trades Union Congress is meeting. Its strong man, Mr. Bevin, is in the Government, the members of the General Council are busily engaged on various government committees, many of the intermediate leaders are working as full-time officials in the Ministry of Supply. The Trade Union Executives who voted for the coalition Government have five months' experience of its operations to survey.

The Labour Movement went into the Coalition Government on the pretext that it was necessary to prevent the triumph of Fascism in Great Britain. Now no worker will deny the right of the Labour Movement to do all in its power to prevent the triumph of Fascism. Indeed the Communists and the militants generally fought to induce the Labour Party to organise the genuinely anti-Fascist forces in Britain, in order that a mighty barrier be placed in the way of Fascist advance at home and abroad.

But the question which the Trades Union Congress has to consider is whether the coalition of the Labour Movement and the main body of British monopoly capitalism is likely to create such a barrier, or whether it is likely under the pretext of organising the British for the war, to prepare the way for a Fascist régime in this country. For Fascism is the concentrated expression of monopoly capitalism. It was German monopoly capitalism which subsidised Hitler and finally lifted him to power. It was British monopoly capitalism which helped to build up Hitler in the belief that he could be used to attack the Soviet Union. It was the pro-German section of French monopoly capitalism which carried out its *coup d'état* and surrendered France to the Nazis. Yet our Labour leaders would have us believe that British monopoly capitalism is not a pro-Fascist force—presumably because it is British.

The history of coalition governments in recent years shows that they have played a conspicuous part in clearing the way for Fascism. The coalitions of the Social-Democrats and the monopoly capitalists in Weimar Germany, like the recent Blum-Reynaud Coalition in France, tied the workers up with emergency decrees, split their organisations, and prepared the way for the triumph of open Fascism. Is this coalition of British Labour with monopoly capital likely to give any different results?

The apparent basis of the coalition is (1) the Labour leaders accept British monopoly capitalism and agree to assist it to regiment the workers for the effective prosecution of the war; (2) the monopoly capitalists agree to preserve parliamentary and democratic institutions and to co-operate with the trade unions during the war.

There can be no doubt that the first line is being duly carried out. The drive initiated by the Chamberlain Government to reduce civilian consumption in order to provide the necessary resources for the extension of the war machine has gone on with increased energy. In spite of the reduction of the working-class standard of life through rising prices, a Purchase Tax has been imposed. The worker in the munitions industry who has increased his earnings through overtime and Sunday work will have to return a great deal of those increased earnings through the increased income tax. And the financial press assures us that this is only the beginning.

There is no doubt that the rising cost of living, the Purchase Tax, the increased Income Tax will stimulate a powerful movement for increased wages. That is why the Government has hastened to introduce new regula-

tions making strikes illegal. Under those regulations a trade union sanctioning a strike is liable to have its funds confiscated and workers who participate in a strike can be heavily fined. It is nonsense to pretend that such regulations would be introduced if the Government did not anticipate a powerful wave of working-class resistance to any attempt to further reduce the standard of life.

It will be claimed of course that lock-outs are also prohibited, but then employers are not in the habit of locking out workers in order to secure a change in a national trade union agreement at a time when there is full employment and high profits. But the employer can, under this national arbitration scheme, cut piece-work prices or worsen working conditions, and the workers have to accept this pending arbitration. If they refuse to work under the worsened conditions (pending arbitration) the regulations define this as a strike for which the workers are liable to be punished, and not as a lock-out for which the employers are liable to be punished. Associated with the penalisation of the right to strike there is the power to compulsorily transfer labour from one point to another—now operating in the munitions industry and in docks—in other words, complete industrial conscription. Thus the Labour leaders co-operate with the Government in driving down the standard of life and in seeking to deprive the workers of the means of resisting that drive.

But these facts have no effect on many trade union officials. The unions, they say, are being consulted at every point and are actively co-operating in the war-time economic machinery. Do not many former trade union officials function as inspectors in the Ministry of Supply and in other government appointments? Is this not a guarantee that the workers' interests will be safeguarded in the Coalition Government? It is not. The capitalist class remains in control and capitalist necessities reign supreme. The war necessitates that the standards of the civilian population shall be cut and capitalists' interests necessitate that the maximum amount of this cut shall be imposed on the working class. For no matter the number of trade union officials who may be operating in the lower organisations of the State economic machinery the fact remains that basic economic policy is determined by the monopoly capitalists dominant in the Coalition Government and that the key points in the State economic machine are manned by the nominees of big business. The trade union official in State service operates on the basis of a policy determined by big business.

This actually hinders the trade union movement from defending the standards of the working class from capitalist and governmental attack. Its main leaders are in the Government which is engaged in cutting down the consumption of the civilian population. Many of its subordinate officials who know intimately how the machinery of the unions can be manipulated are in Government service. It is much easier in this situation to manœuvre the unions into doing what the Government wants them to do than would be the case if the unions remained independent. Many of the union officials not yet in government employment have their eyes open for possible government jobs. They are not likely to strenuously resist the Government from which they are expecting favours. Added to this process of corruption there is the victimisation of left officials. All trade union officials are expected to get special permits to visit Government jobs with a view to organising their

members. A fair number of officials of left views have failed to obtain such permits. This is of course a direct attack on their position in the union. For if an official is known to be barred from pursuing his organising duties on Government jobs, a certain number of members may contend that he is less valuable to the workers as an organiser. Thus direct State coercion of the workers is supplemented by widespread corruption and intimidation within the movement. The State-influenced trade union leaderships are seeking to undermine the unions from within.

In view of this complete shackling of the trade union movement it is interesting to note the very great place on the agenda occupied by resolutions from the main trade unions calling for a repeal of the Trades Disputes Act:

"This Congress" declares the National Union of Railwaymen, "places on record its complete disillusionment regarding the claims of the National Government to be pursuing the present war in the interests of freedom and democracy, whilst at the same time it pursues a policy of refusing to repeal the Trades Disputes and Trade Union Act of 1927."

The N.U.R. does not specify whether it is the Chamberlain or the Churchill Government that is referred to in this resolution. The Transport and General Workers Union wants the act repealed "in view of the increasing duties and widening responsibilities which the trade unions have undertaken," and the Draughtsmen make a similar claim "in view of the Government reliance on T.U.C. collaboration in the present struggle and in virtue of the key positions of the trade unions for the successful defence of national freedom."

Now all these resolutions are symptomatic of the enormous steps towards the State regimentation of the unions that have been taken since the Labour leaders entered the Government. For what does this terrible Act of 1927 do? (1) It makes political strikes an offence. (2) It makes it an offence for a union in one industry to call a sympathetic strike to assist the unions in another industry. (3) It interferes with picketing. (4) It imposes on the unions an irksome method of collecting the political levy.

On the basis of its refusal to repeal this Act, the National Union of Railwaymen doubted the professions of the National Government to be "pursuing the present war in the interests of freedom and democracy".

But when the Labour leaders enter the Government, instead of restoring the lost liberties of the trade unions, they co-operate with the monopoly capitalists in depriving the unions of the liberties which they still possess. In contrast to the Trade Union Act of 1927 the Labour leaders have agreed to (1) make all strikes illegal; (2) make all picketing illegal; (3) retain the irksome method of collecting the political levy. And this fresh attack on trade union rights, extending far beyond that of the 1927 Trade Union Act, was put into operation by means of regulations issued by Mr. Bevin who a few weeks before was chiding Chamberlain for his refusal to repeal the 1927 Act. There could hardly be a more striking contradiction between the aspirations of the union membership and the action of their representatives in the Coalition Government.

On the wages question there is a similar contradiction. The Amalgamated Engineering Union has a resolution on the Agenda which declares—

That this Congress considers that wages were far too low prior to the outbreak of War. The research of Sir John Orr and other medical authorities substantiate this standpoint. Now due to the increased cost of living, real wages have been reduced. Congress therefore declares its determined opposition to the policy of the National Government which aims to place the cost of the war on the shoulders of the working class. It instructs the General Council to assist and co-ordinate all sections of the movement in their efforts to improve wages and to inform the Government that the trade union movement is determined to improve the low wage standard of its members.

The assertions of this resolution are irrefutable. Wages were too low before the war. The cost of living has advanced faster than wages. What have the Labour Members of the Government done?

They have supported the Government in further cutting working class standards by the imposition of the Purchase Tax. They have supported it in stripping the workers—whom they told to go to it—of their overtime earnings by means of an increased income tax collected at its source.

They have imposed compulsory arbitration in order to make it more difficult for the workers to resist this attack. Instead of co-ordinating the movement to secure wage increases they are throttling the movement in order to ensure wage decreases. There is no doubt that they are defending capitalism to the last ounce of their strength.

But what of democracy? Suppose Chamberlain had come out at the beginning of the war and declared "In order to defend democracy it is essential that I shall have the right to intern trade unionists without trial" what an uproar there would have been in the unions. Yet immediately the Labour leaders enter the Churchill Government it proceeds to exercise that right. Johnny Mason, an active trade unionist, is imprisoned without trial. This case has been referred to as a British Tommy Mooney case or a British Dreyfus case. Mooney and Dreyfus were falsely accused, but they at least knew what the accusations were. Johnny Mason does not know and is unable to offer a defence. No single action of the Government has alarmed rank and file trade unionists more. But the bureaucracy is not only complacent. It is actively defending the right of the Government to imprison trade union members without trial. It has been the sad experience of the writer to read the letters which some trade union general secretaries are sending to their branches in connection with the Mason case. How do the branches know that Mason is imprisoned for trade union activity? Why did Mason not appeal to his union executive in the first place? These and similar questions are addressed by the trade union bureaucracy to their members. There is evidently no need for this government to employ political hacks to cover up their misdeeds. The union bureaucracy are willing volunteers. But all the trick questions of the bureaucracy cannot conceal one elementary fact. Johnny Mason, an active shop steward and trade unionist, is being detained. He cannot defend himself because he does not know what charge has been levelled against him. And the union bureaucracy, fresh from meetings and conferences where it has been ranting about the need to defend democracy, is now covering up this outrageous crime against the working class.

The Trades Union Congress cannot overlook the fact that since the Coalition Government was formed not only is the capitalist class less chary

of attacking democratic rights but the Labour leaders, refusing to defend their own members, are endeavouring to defend a policy of concentration camps for Shop Stewards.

What has been reached is, of course, not yet full-blooded Fascism but it is a tremendous step on the way. It was a policy of this character which shackled the French working class and made easier the emergence of a Pétain. But the Pétain tactic of capitulation to foreign Fascism is not the only possible variation. One can advance to Fascism on the basis of regimenting the working class for the carrying out of the Imperialist war to the bitter end. This is the policy that the General Council of the British Trade Union Congress is helping to carry out.

We must, however, see that there is a twofold process. The bureaucracy are co-operating with the employers and the Government more openly and unashamedly than ever before. But in the workshops there is a growing resistance to all attempts to worsen conditions. This is coupled with a growing contempt for the ruling class, for the man in the workshop does not treat the débacle of last summer as a failure of supply but on the contrary as a many-sided failure of the whole class leadership of this country. The ruling class feel this. That is why they are at such pains to boost the Prime Minister. The individual who has a little political credit left is pushed forward to occupy the place of the discredited class leadership.

The workers, however, are learning rapidly. They have found a means in the shop stewards committees of uniting the workers in many factories. The next step is how to unite the organised factories on a district and national basis in bonds of indissoluble solidarity. Both the shop stewards representing the will of the workers to defend their conditions and the bureaucracy acting as the agent of the Government in the Labour movement are quite conscious of this central problem. The shop steward wants to reach out from his factory. He does not regard the quarterly meeting permitted by his union as a sufficient link with the workers in other factories. He desires a more continuous association. But the Executives of the unions recognise that the association of the shop stewards on a district and national basis would mean the coming together of a leadership which would challenge the present policy of clearing the way for a British type of Fascism. Hence they are using discipline and threats of expulsion to keep the shop stewards from associating with each other. But the workers will find a way to this objective, as they will find a way to defend themselves even if the right to strike has been taken away.

However, the struggle around wages is only the beginning of the struggle to defend the workers' conditions. For there is a radical difference between a capitalist economy at peace and at war. In a capitalist economy at peace the workers, if they succeed in raising wages will find the shops stocked with the goods they want. Not so in a war economy where government control is deliberately engaged in reducing the amount of civilian goods produced in order to increase the amount produced by the war industries. It is not only possible, it is extremely likely, that the workers will in a war economy find themselves with more money in their hands confronting less goods in the shops, with the consequent result in higher prices, or scarcity and rationing. The fight for wages must therefore be the starting point for a fight for control, for a fight for a People's Government which will take control of

the economy of the country. In the workshop it is necessary to struggle to take from the employer his arbitrary right to dismiss workmen, to demand access to his books, control of the A.R.P., L.D.V., and welfare arrangements. On a wider field it is necessary to unite all the forces of the working class and the middle class in the struggle for a People's Government without any representatives of capitalism and Imperialism.

How do the unions face up to this question of the Government? The National Union of Vehicle Builders ask Congress to instruct the General Council "to take every step to remove the men responsible for the Munich policy from the Government". But the General Council, through the mouth of Sir Walter Citrine, has already explained that this is impossible. Only if the men of Munich get out themselves or if the Tory caucus decides to withdraw them can there be a change according to Sir Walter.

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen has a resolution declaring that "the future of the people of this country can only be successfully safeguarded by a Government composed of representatives whose history and record of achievement is compatible with the broadest principles of the Labour Movement". Both those resolutions mirror the discontent of large numbers of union members with the existing Government. The delegates who support them however must be prepared fearlessly to confront the challenge of the General Council which will declare that it is impossible to advance to a new Government unless the Labour representatives leave the present Government. For there is no proof that the Labour leaders are modifying the policy of the present Government in a progressive direction, while there is ample evidence that the present Government is pushing the Labour bureaucracy in a reactionary direction. There is a Government which is driving resolutely to reduce the standard of life of every trade union member and the General Council tries to demonstrate that it would be a dreadful thing if the Labour Movement in deciding to fight for a People's Government withdrew its representatives from that body.

We are writing this article before the General Council has issued its annual report and we do not know what prospect it offers the people at this stage of the war. But the prospect which the British monopoly capitalists with whom it is in alliance are offering the British people is both sharp and clear. It is to endure the bombings until the flow of American munitions and American manhood turns the scale. The British Empire will reach the height of its effort in 1942—the U.S. in 1945 and after that—Victory. The entry of U.S. big business into the war will make the Labour leadership the still more contemptible lackey of monopoly capitalism.

The only alternative to this is to struggle for a People's Government, that will bring about radical social changes in Britain in war-time, that will appeal over the head of Hitler to the German people and the oppressed peoples of Europe, and that will seek co-operation with the Soviet Union. The first way, the Labour leaders' way, is one which leads deeper into the Imperialist war, the second way is a People's way out of the Imperialist war, the way of the European revolution stimulated by the revolutionary struggle of the people of this country. That is the final choice before the Trades Union Congress.