

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

Labour Struggles in Britain.]

By J. T. Murphy.

We are in for a period of industrial strife. Two big strikes are raging now and numbers more are in the offing. At the moment all the German Seamen in British Ports are on strike, whilst the Locomotive Engineers and Firemen are tying up the railways. Unless a settlement is arrived at quickly, it only wants a trifle and the whole transport system will stop. The dockers are sympathetic to the striking seamen and have demonstrated it in a practical way. They are chafing under the dislocation caused by the railway strike and the emphatic rejection of their demands for a two shilling per day increase in wages. Their existing agreement terminates on Jan. 31. The building workers have also tabled demands for 2d. per hour increase on base rates, whilst the miners by an overwhelming majority have given 3 months notice to terminate their agreement with the mine-owners. That the stage is set for a first class row is certain.

It will be observed that all these struggles are either against reductions in wages or demands for increases in wages. Many agreements made at the beginning of the big slump in 1921 are automatically ending and fresh demands are in order. The workers are chafing under the losses of the last 3 years. The unemployment figures are not so large as a year ago, and the

slightest breath of improvement in trade seems to be the signal for a forward movement. Besides this fact, the workers in some industries have held their own against the onslaught of the last few years and are encouraged to forge ahead. Of these the building workers stand foremost. The big demand for builders when others were more severely hit by unemployment, added to the big organizational plans the Building workers have carried through, have retained the short hours (varying from 41½ to 46 hours per week according to season) as well as kept their wages fairly high. Recently they received ½ d. per hour increase through the operation of the sliding scale agreement, but that does not interfere with their new demand for 2d. per hour increase on base rates.

But more than the question of wages is involved in all these disputes. Ever since the war-time efforts to establish compulsory arbitration, there have been continuous efforts to work it in by the back door. In principle the policy was emphatically rejected by the whole union movement, but in practice there has been a ceaseless effort to bring it into being. In place of compulsory Arbitration Courts, there were established arbitration courts to which both employers and unions could appeal by common agreement, and the finding of such a court was to be binding upon both parties who appealed. Then there were set up Wages Boards to which both sides could take their demands and the findings of such bodies would be recommended to the respective organizations for acceptance or rejection. Besides these are the various wages and conditions agreements arrived at by direct negotiations between the employers and the workers, as in the case of the miners.

The present struggle between the two railway unions is focussing on this process of developing conciliation boards into compulsory arbitration courts. The N. U. R. led by Thomas, is in the forefront of this struggle to eliminate industrial strife by arbitration. It is not more than a year since what is known as the 728 arbitration award became his weapon for the re-grading of the railway workers and the defeat of the competing unions. But the conciliation railway boards are the leading features of the struggle on this occasion. Thomas and Cramp of the N. U. R. hold that, having signed the wages board findings, it is their job to fight for their acceptance in the unions. The Locomotive Society, led by Bromley, refuses this point of view and holds that the men of the union shall decide on their acceptability in relation to their own circumstances. Bromley holds that the Wages Boards and Arbitration Courts are only the first rounds of the struggle for what the men want and not the end of the struggle. So it will be observed in the following account of the dispute that Thomas and Cramp discover a new use for the word „blackleg“. „Blacklegging on the agreement“!! Men who strike after the agreement is signed etc. are blacklegs on the decision of the union etc.

Arbitration and Labour Government.

That the struggle is important from the point of view of the development of compulsory arbitration needs to be emphasized, especially in view of the advent of the Labour Government. It is already apparent that „industrial peace“ is to be the slogan of this Government, and it is certain that every dispute will be used in the direction of developing „conciliation machinery“ for the purpose of stifling mass revolts. Immediately it became clear that the Labour Party were about to take the reins of office, even the I. L. P. organ, the „New Leader“ began to sob about industrial disputes and plea „for the common cause“. For example, Mr. Brailsford on the railway crisis: „It would have been difficult to invent a diversion so nicely calculated to upset public confidence and to foster the mood of panic“. „What is at stake is the whole future of this machinery of conciliation...“ „No one disputes the abstract right of the Associated Society to reject a decision with which they are dissatisfied. But it is clear that if they do so, the moral authority of these decisions is destroyed.“ „The real sanction for the working of conciliation is public opinion“. „Sooner or later the discipline of service must replace the discipline of the class struggle“. „This strike, if it takes place, will deal the Labour Party in public opinion a blow which no Rothermere or Beaverbrook could have inflicted... If we are fit to govern, we must learn in the industrial as well as in the political fields to master our jealousies to suppress our egoists, and to organize ourselves, in the workshop as in the party, for the triumph of the common cause“.

There you are! „Graduation in excelsis, conciliation in bucketsfull, and right-down treachery to the workers.

Parliamentary Obsessions.

But this is not all. Were it only the columns of the „New Leader“ which poured out this kind of stuff, we could ignore it completely without any harm being done. These manifestations, however are symptoms of widespread views amongst the leaders. Parliamentarism threatens to sweep the boards at the expense of the industrial movement. Is there the chance of a struggle between the unions and the boss? Then the union leaders must intervene for peaceful purposes, to conciliate, to paralyse mass action. Are there differences in policy? Then the big battalions stand the best chance, autonomy becomes the means of fostering the division and so long as this lasts there is little prospect of a united mass fight. That is why F. Hodges stands for autonomy in the M. F. G. B. That is why it waxes hot and cold about industrial unionism — hot if it will prevent action, as in the present struggle on the railways, cold if proposed as a means of struggle.

Perverting Industrial Unionism.

Nothing could make this matter more abundantly clear than the present railway dispute. Here there are two or three unions covering the whole industry, viz., the N. U. R., the National Union of Railway Clerks and the Associated Society of Locomotive men. First the N. U. R. poses as an industrial union, but immediately aims at destroying its revolutionary significance by ignoring the claims of the Loco-men, who were in a minority. In fact it accepts terms which hit the loco men and they alone. Whilst the latter having only 20,000 members out of 300,000 cannot make their resistance felt. At one stroke the real purpose of industrial unionism is destroyed. Instead of it taking the form of a unity to advance the interests of all concerned, of a better fighting instrument, it is used to divide the workers against each other. It is this overriding of the interests of the minority of locomotive workers that keeps and justifies the existence of the Locomotive Men's Association. A craft union becomes a fighting organization and the industrial union the organization of funk and betrayal.

It is doubtful whether there has ever been a dispute where union rivalry has been more bitter. The leaders of the N. U. R., Messrs. Thomas and Cramp, not only denounced the strike before it started, although the loco men had joined in the 1919 railway strike without having the slightest material interest in the dispute, but on every day since the strike began they have actively functioned as strikebreakers. Even when the loco men struck unitedly and many of the N. U. R. loco men came out unofficially, Thomas declared, amidst the derision even of the capitalist press, that the strike was „a fiasco“. In fact it can be safely asserted that had not Thomas most emphatically declared in favour of the Wages Board, the railway companies would have modified their attitude before the strike began. From the moment they realised that Thomas's hatred of Bromley threw him entirely on their side, they have been most vigorous in their opposition to any modification and are insisting on the Wages Board findings being treated as an arbitration award. It is this feature of the situation, aggravating the dissensions in the unions, which is demoralising the whole union movement. The employers have in this case selected the engineers as the means of defeating all the railwaymen. For more than two years the employers have played off one district of the miners against another or a number of districts against the whole Union Federation. With the transport workers they have selected the dockers as the centre of attack, whilst leaving the remainder of the transport workers in the clutches of 300 different agreements. In the agricultural struggle they settled with every county or part of a county in turn. No wonder there is no united struggle. With practically all the union leaders and now the Labour Government enamoured with the philosophy of „gradualism“, „industrial peace“, „conciliation“ and „compulsory arbitration“, a strike is regarded as most regrettable, an extension of it as a terrible event, and a united attack upon the boss as a calamity. It is a healthy sign that the workers have different views on these matters and it is going to be no light job for the union leaders and the Labour Government to prevent a succession of strikes on an increasingly larger scale.

The Communist Party naturally is working with all its strength on behalf of the strikers and agitating for the united action of the railway men, transport workers, miners and builders.

In the „Workers Weekly“ the organ of the Communist Party the facts of the railway dispute are set forth in the most telling manner.

The R. I. L. U. Bureau and its organ the „Worker“ are fighting splendidly in the same direction. The slogans of the „Worker“ are especially effective: „A craft union which fights is better than an industrial union which funks“, is getting home. „Scabbing by order of Thomas is still scabbing“ catches the officials on the raw.

The Seamen Strike.

But now let us turn to the other strike and the strikes that are preparing. The outstanding event of the last few weeks has been the strike of the German seamen as they have landed in British ports. More than 100 ships are tied up and the crews are being helped by the British Unions: The National Sailors and Firemen's Union and the Transport and General Workers Union are lending a hand. The two unions directly involved are the Seamen's Section of the Transport Workers' Union and the Deutscher Schifffahrtsbund. Although one is affiliated to Amsterdam and the other to the R. I. L. U. they are fighting together. Here in the ports there is no question of differences, only the question of strengthening the strike. In this the dockers' section of the Transport Workers are continually taking a hand. In the London docks they forced the German Consul into negotiations by dismantling the unloading machinery, and in all ports the British unions are picketing, placing their union headquarters at the disposal of the strikers and it is definitely stated that any attempt to find blackleg crews from the Continent or elsewhere, will lead to a more vigorous extension of the strike in the ports. The wages of German seamen are two pounds, eighteen shillings per month, that of British seamen nine pounds per month. The German seamen are demanding the latter terms.

By Feb. 1, the Dockers may be involved on their own account. The Transport workers agreement terminates on Jan. 31 and the Dockers have demanded two shillings per day advance. This has been flatly refused.

Other movements developing are the miners and builders. But the negotiation period is not yet over. The miners by an overwhelming majority have decided to give three months notice to end the wages agreement. The new terms which the miners are demanding, are not yet decided.

The foregoing will enable one to understand the issues that are being fought and the direction they are taking. In all cases the fight starts with the wages question and develops into the struggle against compulsory arbitration and the giving of an arbitrary character to the findings of negotiation boards.

The Struggle of the German Seamen.

By G. Hardy.

German seamen are still on strike in the ports of the British Isles. Over 75 ships are tied-up, involving according to latest reports 1200 men. The strike is now in its third week and the seamen are as firm as ever in their stand for a wage commensurate with the necessities of life. They are asking for British rates of pay. They are determined to save their wives and families from the starvation and misery now prevailing at home.

In order to understand this strike we must know something of the struggle of the workers since the Armistice. It was the seamen who contributed marvellously to the revolution in 1918. The sailors of Kiel revolted and in all the ports they were in the forefront, of the struggle which made the Weimer constitution possible. But since then they have always been betrayed by the Social Democrats. Noske at the very start established his policy which has characterised the rule of Social Democracy and the bureaucracy of central trade unions ever since. He congratulated them at Kiel upon their achievements in saving the revolution, which kept him and his colleagues in power during the Kapp Putsch, but when they continued to fight to make a complete working class revolution, he replied the very next day with machine guns. The history of the last five years is one of bloody suppression.

The last year has been the worst for the German seamen since they helped to dethrone the Kaiser. The rapid decline of the mark has affected seamen most, as they received their wages upon returning to the home port. Sailors who were away on a three month's voyage had not enough even to buy one loaf of bread. And even with the established rate at the time of signing, their