

- INTERNATIONAL -

PRESS

CORRESPONDENCE

Vol. 4 No. 23

3rd April 1924

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The V. World Congress of the Communist International.

(Telegram to the Inprecorr.)

The Executive Committee of the Communist International decided at its Session held on the 21st March last to convene the **V. World Congress of the Comintern for the 5th June 1924 in Moscow.**

Before the Congress a **Session of the Enlarged Executive** will be held which will begin on the 25th May.

The **Agenda** of the Congress has not yet been finally settled, but this will be communicated to the press within the course of the next few days.

Executive Committee of the Communist International.

The Labour Government in Deep Waters.

By J. T. Murphy.

London, March 22, 1924.

Mr. Tom Shaw the Second International leader and Minister of Labour in His Britanic Majesty's Government is having bad luck. It seems to be of no avail that our labour leaders don't want strikes. The workers have apparently made up their minds that whether their leaders like it or not they are going to get a bit of their own back. Ever since 1921 they have had reduction after reduction in wages and have been exceedingly patient about them. They have been told that things are on the mend, and it is true that there are less unemployed than there were a few months ago. So now for getting back some of the goods that have been stolen from them. When the Loco' men challenged reductions with a strike and then the Dockers forced the pace and won concessions, a real tonic was administered to the whole movement and a wages offensive is in full swing. This time the workers are taking the initiative.

On Friday midnight the 21st March 40,000 tram and bus men struck work. That is a terrific blow in London where trans-

port is a key industry. The first effects of the strike even at this time of night were exciting. Hundreds of hotel workers and market workers had to walk from the centre of the city away into the suburbs. Crowds of people who had counted on a last minute settlement were stranded, and rushed for the tubes. Here the congestion was so great that the police had to be called upon to regulate the traffic. If the tubes join in the strike then London is in a fix with a vengeance. As per usual the officials are trying to confine action to simply a section, but whether the tube workers can stand the extra traffic which will inevitably be thrust upon them, and blackleg traffic at that, remains to be seen. They are not in the Transport and General Workers Union which is conducting the strike under the leadership of Bevin, but are partly in the National Union of Railwaymen and partly in the Locomotive Engineers and Firemen. There is a working agreement between the latter union and the Transport Unions and it only requires the word from the officials and the strike can become general throughout London transport.

The Electrical Trades Union also threatened that any attempt to introduce blackleg labour will be met by the cutting off of electric power throughout London.

The strike arises from the demand of the union for an increase of 8/- per week for Tram Drivers and Conductors, made as far back as six months ago. The demands of the men have never been rejected on their merits. They have always met with postponement and equivocation. Only when the men decide to strike the employers call for arbitration and forget their own refusal to put into operation the findings of a previous court of Inquiry in 1921. All the governments from that date have been warned as to what situation was developing, but none took any action until faced with the strike. There are of course quite a number of authorities involved, viz: The London County Council, a number of Local Councils and private Companies. The private companies have refused to concede anything. The London County Council is willing to concede 5/- and some of the other Councils 2/-. The Councils are asking for Arbitration, but the companies refuse it and the Unions don't want it. The Government is in a dilemma. It has utterly failed before the strike, to achieve anything which would avert a strike, and it certainly doesn't like the idea of the sympathetic strike extending. The Bus drivers and Conductors are striking with the trammies in sympathetic action as members of the same union and it doesn't take much in the way of incitement to extend that kind of thing once it has begun.

Mr Shaw knows these things quite well, and has plunged for the Court of Inquiry. The fact that some of the authorities have expressed the willingness to make some concession points the way to the settlement. Shaw will aim to get the other bodies to accept the compromise and then persuade the union to accept less than it set out for.

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The position of the Engineering and shipbuilding workers is more difficult. On February 19th a thousand engineers in Southampton struck work, against official orders, for an advance of wages. Their rate was 47s./6d. per week, one of the lowest rates amongst engineering workers in any of the leading towns. Their rate before the war was 40/6. If the cost of living determined the wages, they should be receiving to-day 72/6. On February 25th they were joined by the Shipyard workers, raising the number on strike to 6,000. At the same time the Engineering and Shipbuilding Federation of Unions has a demand for a 10s/- increase before the employers. The employers are trying to use the Southampton strike to stop negotiations on the national 10/- demand. The Unions appear to protest, but all the leaders in turn have been down to Southampton to persuade the men to return to work and not to "spoil the National negotiations". The men regard the threat of a national lock-out as bluff and refuse to return to work. And so far they have proved quite correct. The employers should have carried out their threat yesterday, but again deferred action. The men want an additional 7s/6d on to the national demand and are intent on getting it from the local employers. And again there is likelihood of the Minister of Labour stepping in with a Court of Inquiry.

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But the Government's difficulties are still greater with the miners. The decision of the miners to reject the offer of the mineowners and call on the government to proceed with the Miners Minimum wage Bill placed them in a tight situation. The miners had met in conference on the morning after the defeat of the Labour Government on parliamentary procedure. Ostensibly this defeat was on the question of appropriating time for the clearance of Government work. Actually it was the manoeuvring of the mineowners to prevent the introduction of the private members Bill on the question of the Miners' Wages. This Bill demanded a minimum wage on the 1914 basis plus extra, equal to the rise in the cost of living. By appropriating private members time the Bill would be defeated. The Miners conference recognised this and turned down the mineowners offer with a view to forcing the Government into a straight fight on the miners question, with the Government adopting the private members Bill as their own.

The Labour Government does not want to face this issue. It is argued that the miners question is a sectional question and not one which appeals to even all the workers, and therefore it would be fatal for the Labour Government to face certain defeat and have to appeal to the country. The Minister of Mines, Mr. Shinwell, one of the slippiest opportunists in the

Government, is accordingly striving for all he is worth to secure a settlement of the dispute by direct negotiation between the miners and the mineowners with the Minister of Labour as mediator. In this policy he is supported by the "New Leader" and Mr. F. Hodges who, now he is employed at the Admiralty, feels himself somewhat free to give his advice as an onlooker and appear as a bold partisan on behalf of the miner. It is interesting to find him a sudden convert to settlement outside parliament. It is not so many months ago, when the miners looked like taking to direct action by striking, that he told them to look to parliament. Now they have turned to Parliament they have to look to direct negotiation. It is awkward but difficult to resist the idea that he opposes action of any kind which would involve him and his colleagues in any struggle.

There are big dangers ahead for the miners as well as the Labour Government. If the latter fails to get concessions, refuses to bring in a Bill and fight on it, and brings about a situation where the Miners Federation is divided and landed into making local settlements, its fate is sealed. Already some of the miners leaders, Varley for example of Nottingham, of the better paid districts, are in favour of accepting any concession however small it may be. The poorly paid districts of course are opposed to such a policy. And the question is whether the miners are going to be led into the trap of local settlement.

Again the government is proposing an inquiry. But if there is an industry wherein there is no need for any inquiry, wherein everything there is to know about it is known publicly, it is certainly the mining industry. The facts briefly are: 1) the miners are badly paid and everybody agrees they ought to have an increase. 2) The coalfields vary in their yielding capacity and in some coalfields the present terms have ceased to be an economic proposition. 3) Only national unification of the mining industry can overcome these difficulties. 4) The mineowners cannot do this voluntarily. To expect the mineowners who are prosperous to come to the rescue of those who are not making big profits and voluntarily hand over the spoils is too utopian. 5) Only Nationalisation or some form of compulsory state unification can overcome these difficulties. 6) The employers have not a case, considered from a national point of view, the production for the last twelve months having been near record breaking and the profits totalling £26,000,000, that is more than double pre-war profit.

But the issue of nationalisation is being avoided both by the government who don't want to make it a question upon which they would have to face a general election and by the miners who feel that they were misled when this was a burning question in 1921. This is even reflected in the Miners Minority movement which has been thriving on the crisis. Even this omits the question of nationalising the mines. It demands: 1) That the governing principle of the New Agreement shall be the cost of living. 2) An immediate advance in wages equal to the increase in the cost of living as compared to 1914 (i. e. at present 79%). 3) All increases or reductions in future shall be by the addition or reduction of the flat rate. 4) Six days work or six day's pay, i. e. a guaranteed week for all. 5) All workers on night and afternoon shifts shall in future be paid 20% above ordinary day wages for each shift. 6) Membership of the Federation to be a condition of employment in or about the collieries. 7) An instruction to all District Conciliation Boards, to arrange a regrading of the workmen with a view to reducing the present number of varying standard rates to a maximum of three scales of payment. 8) This agreement to operate for one year, to be afterwards terminated by 14 days notice on either side.

Upon this programme the miners minorities are developing throughout the coalfields and it may be that the salvation of the Miners Federation of Great Britain depends upon the development of this movement. At the moment its nominee A. J. Cook stands an excellent chance of securing the post as Secretary in succession to Frank Hodges. But it is impossible to tell yet whether this effort has struck deeper roots than the discontent arising out of the Wages Agreement. But it was through the actions of its leaders that the first offers of the employers were rejected and the Government was challenged to proceed with the Wages Bill. And now it is a struggle between the politicians of the Labour Government and these leaders as to whether the miners crisis will land them into a first class political crisis.

But housing is the one question upon which the Government is scheming and hopes to make the big thing of its existence. It is in fact calculated by many that upon this question they

will ultimately go to the country with Wheatley and Macdonald united in a campaign of indignation and rousing propaganda. But there is a gap between now and the time when they hope to challenge the parties. This they hope to fill with international negotiations as their contribution to the solution of the unemployed problem and the raising of "British prestige in the Councils of the Nations". But evictions are developing on a big scale and making things urgent. Hence facilities have been given for the pushing of the Rents Amendment Bill which has now gone before a committee. This is a private Bill to which Wheatley gave his blessing but which the government did not adopt as its own Bill for fear of defeat. This proposed not only the reduction of rent but the continuation of control until 1928, with the provision that anyone wanting their house back or wishing to turn out a tenant must provide alternative accommodation. The Liberals and Tories have combined to defeat this measure in the committee stage of the Bill. But the matter is urgent and there are already the threats of Maxton and others to challenge the evictions with mass action. So one more item is going to be watered out of the situation. The government will be compelled to introduce a measure within the next few days to stop evictions, but in order to get it through quickly the question of rent reductions will be sacrificed.

The government is getting into rough waters as well as deep. While the plans for house building are being prepared and negotiations between the unions and the employers are going on, the building workers are pushing in demands for 2d per hour increase in wages. There is a deadlock on this issue already and the building workers are threatening a national strike if something tangible is not forthcoming during next week. They have already had six months of negotiation on the matter and patience doesn't last forever. Then the price of bricks is going up at the prospect of big contracts. In the last few weeks they have risen 5/- per thousand. The fifteen to twenty years building programme with guaranteed employment for three years on end to the building workers and 9/- per week houses is looking a bit sick under these conditions. But then, they will persist in chasing this will of the wisp of "gradualism" and refuse to face the fact that a workers government can never hope to carry out its programmes of reconstruction so long as they leave the boss in possession of the instruments for carrying them out.

It is a rough passage they have entered, and meanwhile it is interesting to observe that the Communist Party has begun to grow and the circulation of its weekly paper has risen from 45,000 to 50,000 during the last six weeks.