

# Where is Labour's Opposition?

**A**FTER the ignominious collapse of the Labour Government and the miserable display of the Labour Party leaders in the General Election, a cry went up in the I.L.P. especially, for the recovery of Labour's Socialist soul. This vain hope that the Labour Party and its I.L.P. leadership could separate its "opposition" policy from its deeds as a government, has been ruthlessly shattered in the first days of the new Parliament. Labour opposition was reduced to an "amen" chorus. The Tory government proceeded to talk down to the Labour leaders in tones of arrogance unsurpassed for many years. Throughout the whole session there was not the slightest evidence of a real opposition.

Mr. MacDonald pledged himself to "continuity." Mr. Snowden congratulated Winston Churchill (arch-enemy of everything Labour) on his return to Parliament, and told him he was not strong enough in dealing with the question of Inter-Allied Debts, but "he wished him well." Mr. Wheatley watered down his challenge to a desire to see houses built, and described the whole business as "the red-cross work" of the class war. Guaranteed profits for the rings on a fifteen years' contract, with dilution of labour for the building workers chloroformed into social pacifism, may be "red cross work," but it is a pretty serious business when 500,000 workers are put into hospital for 15 years, and assured that the class war is no concern of theirs.

Hardly a member of the Labour Party contradicted the principles of the Tories. In almost every case it was only a question of degree in capitalist politics, never the fundamental challenge to the whole policy of the government. It is obvious that the Labour leadership has now definitely become a wing of the bourgeoisie. Even the so-called "left" of the Labour Party does not know where it is. In view of all this, and the coming attack upon wages and labour organisations, it is high time that every worker took stock of the developments now taking place.

## **THE IMPERIALIST PLAN.**

The King's speech outlined the plans of British Imperialism. Its pronouncements on Russia, South America, the Far East, Singapore, Inter-Allied Debts, Imperial preference; its action to Egypt and to the Geneva protocol; its attitude to the

Housing question, which was a bold declaration that the government's only concern was to raise an economic barrier against the development of conscious class war forces; its hope of reduced income tax, its efforts to create the appearance of real economic recovery by means of an extensive replacement scheme—all dovetailed into each other as part and parcel of a thorough revival of imperialist plans, intensifying the struggle for world power.

Three other important facts are thoroughly established in this plan. First, Soviet Russia is to be isolated as much as possible and only to be admitted into the orbit of world trade under the pressure of circumstances. Second, that we are in for a period of intense competition without revolution interferes in Europe. Third, the working class in this country is to provide the means of competition through an attack on the wages, either by inflation of the currency, or by a direct onslaught on the trade unions, while the colonial people are to be more completely subjugated.

This plan of campaign has not just tumbled upon the scene, but has been steadily maturing ever since Mr. Baldwin stepped into the shoes of Bonar Law in 1922, when the latter shattered the Coalition Government. The death of the coalition was a definite set back to the industrialists of Britain and a triumph for finance capital. It marked, also, practically the end of the first big capitalist offensive against the workers. But it was far from being the end of the difficulties of British capitalism. Unemployment still raged on an unprecedented scale. Capitalist economy was in a bad way, whilst the pressure of American Imperialism was making itself felt in no uncertain manner. British Imperialism was becoming supremely conscious of the fact that it was playing second fiddle in world affairs, and unless it could pull itself together it would go lower down the scale.

But any efforts at recovery could only be made under the shadow of American friendship and help. Hence the funding of the American debt, the concessions of the Washington Conference, the co-operation of Britain and America in the Dawes Plan which dominates the European situation to-day. Upon this plan British capitalism builds her hopes of gathering strength to re-assert herself as *the* world power. It may be a vain hope, but there it is. But to give effect to the plan, it needed popular acceptance, a consolidation of the dominant capitalist party, and a fresh offensive against the working class. The scheme has been adopted. The Conservative Party has been re-organised. The ground is prepared for the new offensive against the working class. The effect of this process upon the parties throughout this period

is as astounding as the ease with which the capitalist traders have carried it through.

### **PARTY DEVELOPMENTS.**

When Mr. Baldwin became the leader of the Conservative Party he made unavailing efforts to bring back into the leadership of the Party its most vigorous leaders who had been dropped with the fall of the Coalition Government, Austen Chamberlain, Lord Birkenhead, etc. These leaders along with Churchill and Lloyd George, saw the development of the Labour movement through class war spectacles and favoured a united front of Liberals and Tories against the oncoming forces of Labour. But the internal rivalry amongst the capitalist class reflecting itself in party rivalries, had broken the united front and driven Lloyd George and Churchill back to the Liberal Party, and Birkenhead and Co. on to the fringe of the Conservative Party. There is no reason to think that these class war warriors of capitalism have at any time changed their views on the fundamental unity of interest of the Liberals and the Tory parties. If there is any doubt about this point then the record of their activities since that date should remove it.

With the 1923 election programme, Mr. Baldwin brought back into the forefront of his party both Birkenhead and Chamberlain. With the same programme Mr. Lloyd George was able to re-establish his footing in the Liberal Party by violently opposing the Conservative programme. He came out as the valiant defender of Free Trade and the revivalist of the Liberal Party. The alignment of Party forces as a consequence became clearer. The Conservative Party had regained internal unity. The Liberal Party had been strengthened numerically, but internally it was a victim to contending factions. But Lloyd George with his customary skill succeeded in adapting himself to the Party and "bored from within." The decision of the Liberal Party against coalition with the Conservatives and in favour of the Labour Government produced the next change in which Churchill took the lead in what really was a move back to the old coalition forces. He sounded the class war note at full blast and stood midway between the Tories and the Liberals for a time. The Conservatives proceeded to make the utmost political capital out of the decision of the Liberal Party in favour of a Labour government, although they had acquiesced in the decision and their leader had really anticipated the situation in his 1923 election decision. All the difficulties involved in playing cat and mouse with the Labour Government fell upon the Liberal Party, and especially that old Manchester school section

within it, led by Asquith. The Conservatives throughout were able to pursue an open avowed opposition where they thought it was necessary. The Liberals were always in a quandary, wondering whether this moment or that issue was favourable to ending the situation. Between the Liberalism of the Labour Government and the frankly class war policy of the Conservatives, the Liberal Party was ever at sixes and sevens and its leaders never knew whether the Party would vote unanimously on any issue or whether it would be hopelessly divided. It was torn between those who thought the Labour Government was pursuing a good Liberal policy, and those whose class instincts feared any encroachments of the Labour forces. It was the Lloyd George elements, reinforced in the Parliamentary group by Sir Alfred Mond, who drove the Liberal Party into the closest association with the Conservatives in the crisis which secured the downfall of the Labour Government. Simultaneously with the crisis, Churchill passed on to the Conservative platform, calling for the united front in chorus with Birkenhead, and the feud between the Liberals and the Conservatives was dropped. So much was this the case that open arrangements were made in the form of a pact between the two parties against the Labour Party. The result was beyond the expectations of the most optimistic Tory. The awkward squad (the Wee Frees) of the Liberal Party is almost swept out of Parliament and what little of the Liberal Party is left is representative of the "National Liberals," surrounding Mr. Lloyd George, having a close affinity with the industrial section of the Tory Party. Whatever difference there may be between Mr. Baldwin and this section of his own party and the National Liberals led by Mr. Lloyd George, the consolidation of the capitalist forces in Parliament has made stupendous progress and the situation presents a more open class war alignment of parties. There is not only a conservative majority over both the other parties, but Mr. Lloyd George has declared that "Labour will get no more of his support."

### **LABOUR'S TRANSITION.**

The placing of a party in a class war situation, however, does not necessarily make that party a class war party.

Every assertion of the Conservatives and the Liberals to the effect that the Labour Party is a class war party has been flatly repudiated by its leaders who have gone to great pains to show that it is a "people's party" and not a class party. If the assertions of its leaders are to be doubted then the deeds of the first Labour Government confirm their words in undebatable fashion.

It is upon its foreign policy, that the Labour Government

staked its first claims and asked to be judged. It is upon its foreign policy that the opposition parties of Conservatism and Liberalism have least to complain. Indeed there is hardly an opposition organ which has not lavished fulsome praise upon it, with the single exception of the Anglo-Russian Treaty, and the opposition to this Treaty arises not from disapproval of the political principles the Labour Government had enunciated in its dealings with the Soviet Government, but because they feared that too great concessions had been wrung from the Labour Government by the forces which Mr. MacDonald hates as viciously as the capitalist parties.

It is no exaggeration to say that the consolidation of the basic party strength of the imperialist forces has been accompanied with a political metamorphosis of the Labour Party which is raising doubts and fears in the ranks of the workers. At the same time it has satisfied the capitalist class that its experiment in giving Labour the responsibilities of office under their supervision was the best guarantee for staving off any class war policy that might be developing within its ranks. It is this fundamental disloyalty to the forces which gave it birth that rules out the Labour Party as the party of class war and even the theoretical possibility contemplated in the vision of Parliament as the arena in which through the operation of two parties the interests of the classes may be merged. A party that has already surrendered to capitalism, in spite of its ostensible declarations aiming at the supersession of capitalism through its development and consent, can hardly represent the forces in opposition to capitalism, and these forces will out, let who will say them nay. We are thus brought to a closer consideration of the effect of capitalist strategy in conjunction with the development of the actual class struggle, upon the Labour Party.

At no time has the politics of the Labour Party been based upon class war principles although the very formation of an independent party of Labour was an affirmation of the class war. It was a product of the struggles of the trade unions dominated by Liberalism, against legal oppression. It was a number of years before the small Socialist parties succeeded in persuading this new movement to set before it the Socialist objective. This meant less than it might have done but for the incubus of Parliamentarism it brought with it. Instead of this being a means to transform the wages struggles into political struggles, it became the means of combating the direct action of the masses and the increasing subordination of the strike weapon to parliamentary expediency. The debate in conference after conference of the Labour movement on the question of direct action versus par-

liamentarism, ended in the victory of the latter, and the nearer the Labour Party came to office the more repressive became the attitude to strike action.

The post war period is witness to the more definite crystallisation of the theories and practice of the Labour Party. The Irish Republican movement was the first to challenge it. Will the Labour movement go further than the Liberal Party, will it stand for an Irish Republic or only for the Liberal demand for Irish Home Rule within the Empire? That was the issue. It made its choice. It echoed the Liberal Party and opposed any break-away from the Empire. When the Governing class began to describe the Empire as a commonwealth of nations it took up the cry, blended it with the Socialist dream of a world commonwealth of nations and began to evolve a theory—through the democratisation of the British Commonwealth of Nations to the Socialist Commonwealth. It gathered from the Versailles Treaty the theme of the League of Nations and treading in the footsteps of Lloyd George and President Wilson, pledged the Labour Party to support this new apparatus of capitalism, to "accept it with all its faults," as the means through which to work to Socialism by a process of gradualism that would win the consent of capitalism. The trade unionist support was consolidated by the pledge to develop trade unions along British lines in the colonies and the dependencies, thus quietening the doubts and fears which were constantly rising in the minds of the trade unionists as a result of the increasing acquaintance of the unions with the cheap and sweated labour conditions of the East.

The Socialism of the Labour Party became more and more an ethereal spirit the nearer it approached the task of applying its principles as a governing party. Its period of office has done more to strip it of Socialist claims and to consolidate the liberalism of its leadership than all the struggles in its preceding conferences. Especially is this the case with everything that effects its international and imperial policy. For proof, let us compare the leading commitments of the three parties.

### **THE IMPERIAL LABOUR PARTY.**

The Conservative Party supports the Versailles Treaty. So also the Liberal Party. The Labour Party prior to office subscribed to the revision of the Versailles Treaty. Since it came to office its leader rebuked the Party speakers for reference to revision and has fought for the observance of its provisions as loyally as either the Conservatives or the Liberals. The Conservative Party supports the League of Nations though not enthusiastically. It concentrates on the British section of it. The

Liberal Party supports the League of Nations as per Mr. Wilson. The Labour Party supports the League of Nations as per Mr. Wilson. The Conservative Party prepared the way with the assistance of Mr. Pierpont Morgan's General Dawes and the Liberal banker, Mr. McKenna, for the Dawes Report. The Labour Party accepted the Dawes Report, approved of it as a heaven-sent messenger of peace. The Conservative Party demand the preservation and development of the British Empire as a first charge on Britain. The Liberal Party supports the preservation of the Empire with democratic development in the direction of self-governing colonies according to the political advancement of the ruled, the British Government of course to determine when the other fellows are educated. The Labour Party says exactly the same with emphasis, dotting the i's and crossing the t's in the name of its ideals. In actual practice, it resisted the Indians with the same vigour and emphasis as its predecessors. It chose the late Viceroy of India, Lord Chelmsford, whom it had held responsible for the Amritsar massacre in 1920 to enunciate in the Lords debates the emphatic declaration of the Labour Party leader that the Government of India would receive the full support of the Labour Government in the suppression of any revolutionary movement in that country, and that India will have to follow the constitutional line laid down for it in the Montague concessions of the Liberal Party. On the question of Egypt it refused to withdraw troops from that country and insisted in terms which satisfied Conservatives and Liberals alike that Britain would go no farther than it had gone in the matter of Egyptian independence. In all essentials of International and Imperial politics, the Labour Party has established its claim to be four-square with the Conservatives and Liberals, differing from them only in the degree of efficiency as to the manner in which the same fundamental policy is to be carried through. The one exception was the Anglo-Russian Treaty.

Its domestic policy has undergone a similar development. Its far-famed budget was a model of Liberalism. Its dealings with unemployment remedies have one and all been based on Liberal principles if not always approved by the Liberal party. Indeed its whole object during office has been to prove that it could run capitalism better than the Conservatives and the Liberals. Its claims before the country consist not in what it has done to fight capitalism, but in what it has done to preserve it and grant concessions to the workers and the middle class.

The strategy of the ruling class in the midst of these unstable circumstances has thus been well justified. It has succeeded in com-

mitting the Labour Party to its own schemes and involved it in actual responsibility for their development. The Labour Party can no longer repudiate them on the grounds of conflict with its ideals. It must defend them on the basis of its own actions and politics as a government party. Of this fact the Tories have not been slow to remind the backbenchers of the opposition during the recent session.

### **WHAT NEXT?**

That such a development can stop at this point and allow the Labour Party with such an evolution of its politics to subvert the class struggle upon which it has thrived, is out of the question. When Mr. MacDonald was re-elected leader of the Parliamentary Labour Party, there were five who voted against, and nearly thirty who abstained from voting. That these represent a discontent is certain. But it is necessary to say to the "left" element that their approach to political questions is exceedingly immature. It is childish of Maxton to limit his interests to his own backyard and refuse to take up the big class issues. It is useless for Wheatley to flirt with the "Plebs" and talk of independent working class education and refuse to challenge the leadership of MacDonald in relation to the whole activity of the Labour Party. It is deplorable that George Lansbury should burst out in condemnation of MacDonald's policy at one moment, and in the next swallow all the obligations of imperialism and refuse to raise his voice in protest against the murderous policy of the Estonian government. It is folly on the part of the so-called "left" to meet in conference after conference and spend its time trying to avoid contamination with the Communist Party; it is equally folly and cowardice on the part of those trade union leaders who praise Lenin and think the Communists good fellows, and yet dare not identify themselves with the Minority Movements now springing up everywhere.

The day has gone by for the production of new left programmes distinct from those that are already proclaimed. The "left" has either to move nearer to the Communist Party, identify itself boldly with the Minority movement, or be part and parcel of the MacDonald machine of imperialism. Until they have made that choice Labour in Parliament is an instrument of Conservatism, and the working class is more than ever betrayed. There is no working class leadership to-day outside the Communist Party. To reject it is to reject the working class. To come nearer to our party is to strengthen the working class and help it nearer to victory.

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