

# The British Working Class and the War on China

J. T. Murphy

**D**URING the last few months two questions have dominated British politics—the war on China and the threat of a rupture of relations with Soviet Russia. Both questions at bottom are one question, but in the incidents of the struggle of imperialism against the workers' revolution and national revolution, the war on China has been to the forefront, and the active war policy of the Government of Britain towards China has been much further developed than that towards the Soviet Union. Hence the pre-eminence of China in current politics.

Of course, ever since the Cantonese forces began to march northward the British Government has been conducting a harassing movement against the national revolution. But the most critical stage was reached when the question of the headquarters of the Cantonese became Hankow instead of Canton. Then it was felt by the British Government and other imperialist powers, but especially the British imperialists, that the decisive moment had arrived, and immediately the Government began to move its warships and troops to China to take the offensive. The Government uttered many fine phrases about peaceful intentions but actually pursued a policy of war. From this moment onwards the British working class movement was compelled to face up to this situation.

Prior to this time, there had been a series of declarations supporting the Cantonese. Indeed, on the initiative of the Communist delegates to the Trades Union Congress at Bournemouth, a resolution was moved on behalf of the Miners' Federation of Great Britain by Arthur Horner, protesting against any action of the imperialist government which might lead to a new war—either in the Far East or in the West. This resolution was passed by the Congress but not without opposition. Indeed, Mr. C. G. Ammon, M.P., member of the Labour Party, suggested that the resolution should be withdrawn. This was not the only symptom that the Trade Union bureaucrats had retreated considerably from their anti-imperialist declarations at the Scarborough Congress, for they came under the fire of the Communist delegates and the delegates of the Minority Movement on account of their failure to carry out the decision of the Scarborough Congress to send a Trade Union Delegation to inquire into the position in the Far East.

## The Test Decision

The situation at the beginning of this year, however, was much more acute than at the time of the Bournemouth Congress. The stage was set more decisively for work, and the actual despatch of troops from English shores demanded some decision as to whether the working class movement was to repeat the calamities of 1914.

I propose to pass under review the line taken by the various political forces within the working class movement. How did the Labour Party leadership face up to the situation? First, Mr. MacDonald, as the leader of the opposition, spoke as follows: "Nothing could justify their action if they simply walked away from settlements which past Chinese Governments have allowed us to control and where our people have taken up their abode under the security which they believed that treaties gave them." Addressing himself to the Cantonese he said: "If the Government uses a mob like the Hankow mob for its own purposes it must not be mealy-mouthed as to the consequences." In the "Daily Herald," of January 22, he amplified this by saying: "I also wish that there may be no misunderstanding as to my view about the presence of armed forces in China. No one should welcome more than Mr. Chen precautions that are no menace to him but that secure tranquillity and prevent his hand being forced by those who would like a fight." Mr. Thomas supported Mr. MacDonald as follows: "If troops have to be sent I would infinitely prefer them to send big armies than a handful of people." This statement of the Right Wing leaders characterised the official policy of the Labour Party for a short time—but only a short time, although sufficient to intimidate the British Labour Council for Chinese Freedom, which had been set up by what were known as the Left Wing elements.

## Council for Freedom Afraid

On this Council was the chairman of the Trades Union Congress, Mr. George Hicks, Mr. George Lansbury, vice-chairman of the Labour Party, Tillet, Swales, Malone, Fenner Brockway, James Maxton, etc. This Council had issued a manifesto calling for (1) the recognition of the full sovereignty and independence of China; (2) recognition of the Canton Government as the national government of China; (3) renunciation of extra-territorial privileges; (4) negotiation of new treaties with the National Government to replace the unequal treaties; (5) withdrawal of armed forces from China and all warships from Chinese waters; (6) establishment of closer co-operation between the British and Chinese Labour and Trade Union Movements. Immediately the Labour Party Executive came out with a statement of policy which condoned the line taken by MacDonald in support of Chamberlain, this Council for Freedom got cold feet, and began issuing statements in the press which could only be regarded as supplementary statements to the official Labour Party policy. The Trade Union General Council identified itself with the Labour Party policy and, but for the campaign of the Communist Party, there appeared to be a complete national alliance from the Tories to the Labour Party.

**British Working Class and War on China**—continued

But the I.L.P. suddenly awakened and declared in a leading article of the "New Leader," on January 14: "The Labour Movement should realise the critical nature of the events which are occurring. War with the nationalist government of China would not end in China, Russia might easily be involved. It is necessary that the organised working class movement should immediately make known its determined opposition to any conflict to defend British imperialism in the East. The workers must be aroused as they were when the Council of Action stopped war with Russia in 1920. They must stop the war with China *now*." In its programme for this campaign the I.L.P. put forward in a manifesto that the British Government should declare publicly that it recognises the full independence and sovereignty of China, etc., on the same lines as the British Labour Council for Chinese Freedom, except that it did not call for the establishment of close co-operation between the British and Chinese Labour and Trade Union Movements. On the basis of this programme they began a campaign, but their anxiety to stop the war on China did not carry them far enough to agree to a United Front campaign with the Communist Party. Their campaign assumed entirely a pacifist character. But, nevertheless, in programme it was somewhat different from that of the Labour Party Executive.

It is interesting to observe here again the strange position of this Party. Out of 150 members of the Parliamentary Labour Party, over 100 are members of the Independent Labour Party. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald and Mr. Philip Snowden are members of this Party, and yet there was this remarkable cleavage of opinion, and the refusal of the Labour leaders who were members of the I.L.P. to carry out a single slogan of the Independent Labour Party in their actions. For example, in the I.L.P. manifesto there was a call made upon the Labour and Socialist Movement to prepare at once to

act. It reads: "That the Executive of the Labour Party should immediately invite the General Council of the Trades Union Congress to join with it in summoning a National Labour Convention to express the hostility of the working class to war with China, to plan industrial action if need be, and prevent this calamity occurring. British Labour stopped war with Russia in 1920, it can prevent war with China now if it will!" Although a large proportion of the General Council and of the Labour Party Executive are members of the I.L.P., and undoubtedly hold the hegemony in the ranks of the Labour leadership, there is no evidence that the slightest notice has been taken of this demand for a conference of action.

Nevertheless, the agitation extended throughout the ranks of the Labour Movement. But, we were witness to the following peculiar situation—while the I.L.P. Executive formulated its own demands, when it came to the Albert Hall demonstration it surrendered its own meeting and gave the leadership to MacDonald, who certainly had not subscribed to the demands of his Party Executive.

The Co-operative Movement also presented a strange face to the situation. Notoriously pacifist in its conference resolutions, there appears no trace of a recognition of the crisis as calling for anything of a very special character. Indeed on January 1 its leading organ, "The Co-operative News," said that the British Government manifesto "should help to establish the belief that Britain has no malicious intent with regard to China, and the Chinese have the additional advantage of knowing that the policy now disclosed is one that has the support of the masses of the British people." On January 8 there is not a word in its leading organ about the situation and the women's page is headed "1927, a Peace Year." By February it suddenly dawns upon them that there is really a crisis, and the correspondent is permitted to tell a story about the gravity of the situation, but not the slightest attempt is made to arouse the co-

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**British Working Class and War on China**--continued

operative movement to any form of action. On February 12, it becomes interested in British diplomacy and says: "That the Government's anxiety to secure the co-operation of Italy, or other foreign powers, is evidently due to the belated realisation of the fact that Shanghai is not a British possession but an international concession. This thought was in the mind of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald on Sunday when he questioned whether we had any right to send British troops to Shanghai." But, still, there is no evidence in the paper that the Co-operative Movement has any further responsibilities or obligations to the developing war situation. On February 19 the editorial page says that "the news from China is still a trifle bewildering but nevertheless serious," but still no effort on the part of the leaders to arouse the Co-operative Movement even to protest. Fortunately, a number of Co-operatives have not waited for such leadership, but coming under the influence of local agitation from the various parties, passed resolutions of protest against the war preparations and developments. The same can be said with regard to the Co-operative Guilds.

**Communist Action**

The Communist Party, on the other hand, unhesitatingly seized upon the situation from the beginning and launched a most vigorous campaign in its press and by leaflets and by posters. Indeed, during the first two months of this year the Communist Party has issued about 500,000 leaflets appealing to the workers for united action, exposing the line pursued by the Labour Party leadership, and developing wide mass pressure in every direction. In the columns of "The Workers' Weekly" and "The Workers' Life," this campaign of exposure was conducted week by week. Although it had helped considerably in the creation of the British Council for Chinese Freedom, it unhesitatingly criticised it severely for its inactivity and nervousness. It sent a letter to the Independent Labour Party Executive, requesting a united campaign in view of the points of agreement which were noticeable in the published declarations of the Independent Labour Party. But the I.L.P. Executive refused this offer, and demonstrated at once its lack of sincerity and will to stop the war. This cannot be said of quite a number of local organisations of the I.L.P., who not only participated in the demonstrations jointly with the Communist Party, but actively joined with them in the agitation for "Hands off China" Committees.

**"Hands off China" Committees**

Our Party not only urged the workers to repudiate the sabotage of the "Hands off China" campaign by their official leaders but to create "Hands off China" Committees in every town, to withdraw the armed forces from China and to declare that not a man and not a gun shall go for the war with China. It followed up this agitation by issuing an appeal to the soldiers who were trade unionists and delivered many thousands of manifestoes into the barracks and to the soldiers marching through the streets. The "Morning Post" for the 8th of February writes: "The amount of Communist litera-

ture being poured into the garrisons during the last fortnight has been enormous, and the subject is engaging the attention of the authorities." The "Times" and other newspapers report also of the distribution of great quantities of leaflets to the soldiers on the march, at the railway stations and at the docks. To the dockers of the various ports our Party issued special appeals and sent its leading Executive members down to the docks of London, Portsmouth, Southampton, Liverpool and Glasgow, with a view to creating the widest agitation amongst the dockers as well as amongst the troops. In every centre where local party organisations exist instructions to the Party members demanded that they take the initiative in the calling of conferences of workers for the purpose of setting up "Hands off China" Committees. In the course of a few weeks the party succeeded in getting local Labour organisations in more than seventy different centres to set up "Hands off China" Committees in the teeth of denunciations from the Labour Party leadership.

The effect of the criticism of the Party and its vigorous campaigning was noticeable on the movement. Reinforced by the Minority Movement, which was also devoting all its energies to this campaign, along with the Left Wing Movement within the Labour Party, our Party not only pushed forward into the demonstrations called by the I.L.P. and the Labour Party, but played an important part in a number of successful conferences. In London, for example, the London Trades Council convened the conference of February 12, to which responded 587 delegates from the London Trade Union and Labour organisations. This conference demanded an embargo on the manufacture of munitions and other war equipment and the transport of all armed forces.

**A Mass Campaign**

Similar conferences were planned in the large industrial centres, and we can say that by these efforts the whole Labour Movement was aroused, and the columns of the "Daily Herald" day by day, during the last month, show how protests began to pour in from all directions of the Labour Movement, from trade union branches, from "Hands off China" Committees, Co-operative Women's Guilds, I.L.P. branches, local Labour Parties, etc., etc.

The effect of this mass campaign of the Party, the Minority Movement, the Left Wing in the Labour Party and the I.L.P., produced marked changes in the position of the National Labour Party. When the question was discussed in the House of Commons, on February 10, the change became most obvious. Instead of MacDonald speaking to the resolution of the Labour Party, which demanded the withdrawal of the troops from China, Mr. Trevelyan was chosen as the leading spokesman. And the contrast between his position (and

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**British Working Class and War on China**—continued

the resolution of the Labour Party itself), and that taken by MacDonald and Thomas enabled Mr. Chamberlain to say: "Mr. Trevelyan may be speaking for those behind him, but he certainly is not speaking for those beside him," meaning MacDonald and Co.

The change in the front of the Labour Party, due to mass pressure, proves conclusively that the diplomatic language of Mr. MacDonald is not representative of the feeling of the mass of the workers.

But it is here necessary to observe the amount of pacifism and passivity which still dominates the movement. We have not only to face the fact that the I.L.P. could refuse a United Front, but also the fact that the Communist Party was alone in its attempts to get the message to the troops, was alone in its efforts to get the masses into action, and that, in spite of all their efforts, we do not yet see any evidence of a single strike action at any single point. Of course, there may be many explanations for this lack of drastic action. But nevertheless, whatever the explanation, the fact remains that in the midst of a crisis of this character the dead weight of the bureaucracy of the Labour Movement weighed with deadening effect upon every effort to get mass action.

It is necessary to utter still another word of warning. The character of the agitation which has been conducted up to now has been twofold. The Labour Movement has concentrated on the question of negotiation with all other questions to follow, whilst the Left Wing, led by the Communist Party, has concentrated upon the withdrawal of troops and the cessation of military activity as a preliminary to the negotiation of the independence programme. This was inevitable; but the danger now facing us is that the pacifism of the I.L.P.

and the negotiating mania of the MacDonaldites will create an inertia in the working class movement of Britain which will be blind to the oncoming changes in the Chinese revolution itself.

It is necessary now, more than ever before, to explain to the masses the different social forces which are participating in the national revolution, and to anticipate the pressure of class differentiation and internal struggle which is bound to go on within this revolution. The campaign of MacDonald and the I.L.P. has all been in the direction of strengthening the hand of the Right Wing of the Kuomintang, aiming at any compromise that could be arrived at with the British Government without regard to the future of the Chinese revolution. The danger of this situation must be sharply brought before the workers and their attention directed to the effect on the working class and the peasantry of this national revolutionary struggle. Unless this is done we shall be witness to the Chinese revolution being compromised in the name of peaceful negotiations, and instead of helping the working masses of China to their liberation through the National revolutionary struggle, the British Labour Movement will be helping the British imperialists to a compromise in its favour.

This is the greatest danger of the moment; it can only be met by increasingly clear expositions of the class forces operating in the Chinese revolution, and the more active identification of the working class organisations of Britain with the working class and peasant organisations of China. By developing our campaign along these lines our Party in Britain can not only develop itself as the driving force in the "Hands off China" Committees, but also prove itself once more to be the real custodian in Britain of the international revolution.

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