

The I.L.P. Conference

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IT was expected that three questions would dominate the Conference of the Independent Labour Party at Leicester during Easter week, namely, the war on China; the Trade Union Bill and the relations of the I.L.P. to Mr. MacDonald. These three questions did dominate the Conference, but not in this order of importance. The last question appears to have outweighed all other questions. That it is an important question no one will dispute, though it does not say much for the I.L.P. that the most important questions of the day should be relegated to a back seat. In speaking thus we by no means regard this question as a personal question, although the fate of Mr. MacDonald is involved. The decision of the Conference carried by 312 to 118 votes is that Mr. MacDonald can no longer be a member of the I.L.P. delegation to the Labour Party Conference. This is the essence of the decision when all the trappings have been removed.

This decision has been forced upon the I.L.P. since it put forward the policy of "Socialism in our Time," and the demand for the "minimum wage and family allowances." This "new" policy of the I.L.P. was occasioned by the experiences of the Labour Government. Considerable discontent existed in the I.L.P., a discontent which has been continually growing against the policy of gradualism to which Mr. MacDonald subscribed. Many I.L.P.'ers had their eyes opened by the Labour Government. They openly declared that the Labour Government was not likely to reach Socialism either in our time or anybody else's time if it continued to move at the exceedingly slow pace it had established. Indeed, many are of the opinion that with every step forward it took two steps backward. This gave rise to a discussion in the I.L.P. as to what should be the programme of the next Labour Government. Its feelings were crystallised in the slogan "Socialism in our Time," and the demand for the living wage.

MacDonald's Attack

Mr. MacDonald and other leading members of the I.L.P., but especially MacDonald, at once began to hammer the I.L.P., and even though he was a delegate to the Labour Party Conference from the Independent Labour Party, he publicly declared that the next Labour Government, no more than the last, would not be dictated to as to the order of the measures which it would take to introduce Socialism. He also wrote that "in the I.L.P. minimum wage and family allowance proposals there is a lack of practical imagination together with a super-abundance of ill-founded prophecy as to the result of this act or that. It is political jerry-building of a high order." Indeed, so consistent and fierce have been the attacks of MacDonald upon the I.L.P. of which he was previously chairman, that the secretary of the party stated to the Conference that MacDonald "was opposed to the party on not one issue, but every issue that the I.L.P. has raised at the Labour Party Conference. It is not that Mr. MacDonald differs from us on details of policy, it is that his attitude of mind is wholly

different from the mind of the I.L.P." Again, he said: "that the differences between MacDonald and the National Administrative Council were not on one issue but they covered the whole range of party policy, both at home and abroad, and nobody could suggest that MacDonald represented in all these respects, even a minority of the I.L.P."

With such a wide divergence one cannot be surprised that the I.L.P. at last raises objections to MacDonald as a delegate representing their party. Indeed, it is surprising, nevertheless typical, that the I.L.P. has not raised before now the question of MacDonald's membership. But no, the I.L.P. is one of those remarkable organisations which permits its leading members to discredit it in public and imposes no obligations on its members to carry out the policy to which the party subscribes. For example, Mr. Shinwell openly defended MacDonald in this Conference, severely attacked the policy of the I.L.P., questioned its conclusions, and yet was elected to the new executive of the Party. The observation of the leading organ of this party the "New Leader," says that his election was due "no doubt as a tribute to his debating powers." When this is taken in relation to the fulsome apologies and hero worship that have been subsequently given to MacDonald by the I.L.P. one is driven to the conclusion that the decision has been taken as the result of pressure from below and not as the result of a fundamental change in the leadership of the Party. It is symptomatic of the differentiation process going on in the ranks of the working class, which the I.L.P. is trying to meet by a swing to the left, by the use of more radical phrases. MacDonald had become so deeply involved in the fight against all left tendencies in the Labour movement that it was no longer possible for him even to subscribe to left phrases, hence the sacrifice of MacDonald as the I.L.P. delegate to the Labour Party Conference.

I.L.P. Once Revolutionary

The I.L.P. has thus reached another turning point in its career. When first it appeared on the stage of history, nearly forty years ago, it was playing a distinctly revolutionary role in the British Labour movement. It played, along with a number of other small Socialist parties, a pioneer role in detaching the working class from the old traditional political parties of the bourgeoisie and laying the foundations for an independent political Labour movement. This was an important historical task. By its fight for an independent Labour movement, it got a grip of the apparatus of the trade unions under the banner of "labour independence."

But the further they went in this direction the further away they moved from Socialism. Indeed, they have always had Socialism before them as a "far-off divine event" without any definite relation to the daily tasks which they set before them. It was thus easy for middle class people to utilise this party as a vehicle for public notoriety and the means of contact with the Labour movement in general. As a matter of fact, up to

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1918 the middle classes, the intellectuals, etc., had no means of entrance into the Labour movement other than through the Socialist parties. But in 1918 the Labour Party changed from being a party of affiliated organisations to a Party of affiliated organisations plus individual members. From that moment it was no longer necessary for the trade-union element to pass into the Labour Party through the door of the I.L.P. and the growth of the individual membership sections of the Labour Party has undoubtedly outrivalled the I.L.P. and compelled it to play a new role. Especially was this the case with the rise of the Communist Party. Its job was on the one hand to show there was no need for a Communist Party, and that there was room for all revolutionaries within the I.L.P., and on the other hand, to keep this Party loyal to the leadership of the Labour Party which was dominated by its own right wing elements.

This role of a left-centrist party was comparatively easy until the advent of the Labour Government. Even MacDonald and Clynes could play this game until this new experience forced new issues upon them. It was comparatively easy, so long as Labour was in opposition, without any responsibility for the application of its policy, or bound by any principle of loyalty to the principles of the class struggle. But once Labour had assumed responsibility for the administration of the capitalist State the contrast between words and deeds compelled the Labour Party leadership and the I.L.P. to face up to the new situation.

Cleavage in I.L.P.

The Labour Party leadership, by a series of events over which it had no control, found itself at the head of a great mass movement which had lost faith in the bourgeois parties, and the possibility before it of achieving a parliamentary majority at no distant date. Impressed by this possibility and deeply committed to the bourgeois policy of the nine months in office it could no longer play the role of Socialist agitator simultaneous with that of bourgeois statesman. Hence the cleavage began to show itself in the I.L.P., due to the fact that it had to distinguish itself from the Labour Party or become completely absorbed by it. This paved the way to the advent of the Clyde leaders as the banner bearers of the I.L.P. They were fitted for this purpose in that all of them are accustomed to the use of revolutionary phrases and come from essentially working class constituencies. They only could rescue the I.L.P. from absorption, but to do so they had to differentiate themselves to some extent from MacDonald and Clynes and Co.

But this did not mean that the I.L.P. itself, or that the I.L.P. as a party, was going to play a new role. On the contrary, the action against MacDonald was taken to enable the I.L.P. to pursue its old role of hindering the movement of the masses towards the Communist Party. This is seen at once in the new slogans that are being issued by the I.L.P. The Party Conference reaffirmed the demand for "Socialism in our time," but does this mean that a fundamentally different policy is to be pursued from that of the Labour Party? Does it mean that new obligations are to be imposed upon

the members of the Independent Labour Party within the Labour Party? Not at all! It simply means that the I.L.P. expresses a different opinion as to what a Labour Government ought to do when it secures a majority.

Opposed—Yet "Loyal"

That it means nothing more than an opinion, is clearly seen in the attitude of the I.L.P. to MacDonald and all its members who hold positions in the Labour Party and in the trade union movement. Whilst formally detaching Mr. MacDonald from the delegation of the Labour Party, it pronounces its loyalty to Mr. MacDonald as a leader of the Labour Party, of which it is a part, and its intention of voting for him as the treasurer of the Labour Party. That their opposition to MacDonald is a sham opposition is, therefore, quite clear. And all their talk of fighting for Socialism in our time is so much froth.

If further proof is required the attitude of the I.L.P. Conference to the Trade Union Bill gives this additional proof. All that it has got to say is, that it will support any campaign initiated by the Labour Party to oppose the Bill. Mr. David Kirkwood declared that "the Trade Union Bill proclaimed the class war in all its hideousness." Did this mean that the I.L.P. under such circumstances was intent on taking sides on behalf of the working class and prepared to answer the challenge of the government by a distinct lead to the working class that would seriously fight the Government? Not at all. Every member of the I.L.P. Conference, every leader in that Conference, knew full well that the Labour Party leadership and the General Council of the Trades Union Congress were not, and are not, intent upon a real fight against the government. It gives no lead to the Labour Party in which its leaders could dominate, and waits for the next Labour Government.

Of course, it is not merely coincidence that the I.L.P. took up a similar attitude 12 months ago when the General Strike and the preparations for it became the burning questions before the working class movement. It is consistent with its whole career. It barks a great deal, but does not bite. It is like a toothless old creature that has a grouse against the world and a great capacity for dreaming, but no guts for a fight.

An I.L.P. Speech

Mr. Maxton's speech is an I.L.P. speech through and through. He said: "Industrial peace on the basis of poverty, subordination and degradation, is a thing not to be dreamt of unless the people of this land have every vestige of spirit driven out of them." He denounced the attack of the Government through its trade union legislation and said: "We shall oppose that legislation in the House of Commons and in the country. We shall try to prevent it becoming the law of the land. But that to me seems a negative way of facing the situation. I believe that all sections of the movement should reply to this attack by going out to make the movement stronger than ever it has been before: to double the number of our trade unions, to double the numbers of our Labour Party members, to get an I.L.P. of a hundred thousand men and women, every one to be a fighter and the shock troops of that Labour army and go out on

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a definite offensive against capitalism with, as the key objective, a demand for a living wage for all. The approach of that achievement to be first made at this stage by an immediate demand for a 20 per cent. increase of the wages of all sections of the working class."

Did the I.L.P. Conference set this demand before the Labour Party? No. Did it indicate any ways and means of opposing the legislation? No. Did Mr. Maxton indicate anything which the Conference omitted? No. Did he say what was to be done with this enlarged trade union movement? Did he say what was to be done with the increased number of Labour Party members, or the hundred thousand "shock troops"? Or what he meant by this offensive against capitalism, or how he was to achieve his 20 per cent. increase in the wages of the working classes? There is no indication. Yet Mr. Maxton knows, and the I.L.P. Conference knew, that in Parliament the Conservatives have an overwhelming majority and can automatically put the trade union legislation through without accepting any amendment whatever.

If we examine the I.L.P. proposals with regard to a living wage, we find they consist of the appointment of a commission by the next government "to ascertain as to what the living wage should be in relation to human needs, and the standards of civilised life." So it would appear that this question of the living wage is postponed for an inquiry by the next Labour Government, which according to the policy of the I.L.P. will be led by Mr. MacDonald, who is opposed to the living wage policy and, therefore, to the inquiry. What the next step will be no one knows, as obviously the I.L.P. is opposed to fighting Mr. MacDonald and clearing out the leadership.

How do We Get It?

But Mr. Maxton is a little more specific when he demands a 20 per cent. increase of wages. What is the procedure to be taken? Does Mr. Maxton propose that every trade union shall immediately table a demand for a 20 per cent. increase? And, if so, what is to be done if the employers refuse? Shall the unions take strike action? And if so, shall it be a series of sectional strikes in which we know full well the employers can win? Or shall it be the General Strike? If the General Strike, what about the threat to the State which such a General Strike of necessity makes? Mr. Maxton says never a word about this matter. Yet if he is serious and if the I.L.P. is serious, surely the logic of their proposals should be examined and the I.L.P. should state clearly what it proposes to do in these circumstances. But no, this demand is left in the air only in order to give the appearance of being radical. Instead we are subject to a moral lecture and told that "it is the place of the I.L.P. to lay stress on the mind and will of man as the determining factor in bringing about the change in social and economic affairs and to work for and propagate Socialism with speed but without catastrophe." Possibly it may dawn upon Maxton and the I.L.P. that it is necessary to indicate upon what the mind and will of man shall concentrate, and how to concentrate, and the possibility of achieving that upon which we concentrate our mind and forces; to show how Socialism can be achieved

with speed, or even by degrees, without catastrophe to capitalism. On these questions neither Maxton nor the I.L.P. have ever given a straightforward answer to the working class.

It is this hypocritical phrasemongering which characterises the I.L.P. leaders on every issue, that enables the bourgeois leaders to mock at the Labour movement with scorn and to treat it with contempt. What is the use, for example, of Maxton and his colleagues blethering about the lack of understanding and co-operation between the Labour and Socialist International and the Third International, when on every important issue before the working class of Britain they refuse a united front with the section of the Communist International which stands at its very doorstep. Even in this very Conference, where Maxton declared for the unity of the two Internationals, he refused, whether under instructions or not matters little, to read the telegram of the Communist Party of Great Britain appealing for a united front on the question of the war on the Chinese Revolution and opposition to the Trade Union Bill. He refused to admit the delegates of the Communist Party who had been deputed to convey fraternal greetings and appeal to the Conference for united action on these great issues before the working class movement. All talk of the unity of the two Internationals under such circumstances can only be regarded as hypocrisy and political humbug.

The Test of China

On the question of British intervention in China, it would appear that the I.L.P. Conference passed once more another radical resolution. It protested against the military measures taken by the British Government in China, it declared that a state of open war was steadily developing, called for the withdrawal of armed forces from China and of warships from Chinese waters, demanded an impartial inquiry into the occurrences at Nanking and insisted upon the "right of the Chinese people to go their own road without interference from outside powers." This resolution would be far more welcome if the I.L.P. was really serious in its demand. But there is no evidence of its seriousness in this matter. It retains MacDonald, Clynes, Snowden, Shinwell and others as members of the I.L.P. who are flatly opposed to such a policy, who openly repudiate it. Of the hundred odd members of Parliament who belong to the I.L.P., none will be brought to task when they follow MacDonald's leadership instead of that implied in this resolution. Of the members of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, who are members of the I.L.P., none will be expected to fight for this resolution becoming the policy of the General Council. Once more the I.L.P. barks and does not bite.

Under these circumstances there is no wonder that the I.L.P. has to report a decline of 126 branches during the same period that the Communist Party can report an increase of 150 local organisations. The Leicester Conference of the I.L.P. was conceived as a manoeuvre to set the I.L.P. free from responsibility for the political leadership of the Labour Party that it might propagate Socialism in "nobody's time," that it might pose as a fighter for Socialism without obligations to make deeds correspond with words. But its bluff is called. A party cannot live on phrases, and that is all that is left in the programme of the I.L.P.